The New Criterion

February 1988

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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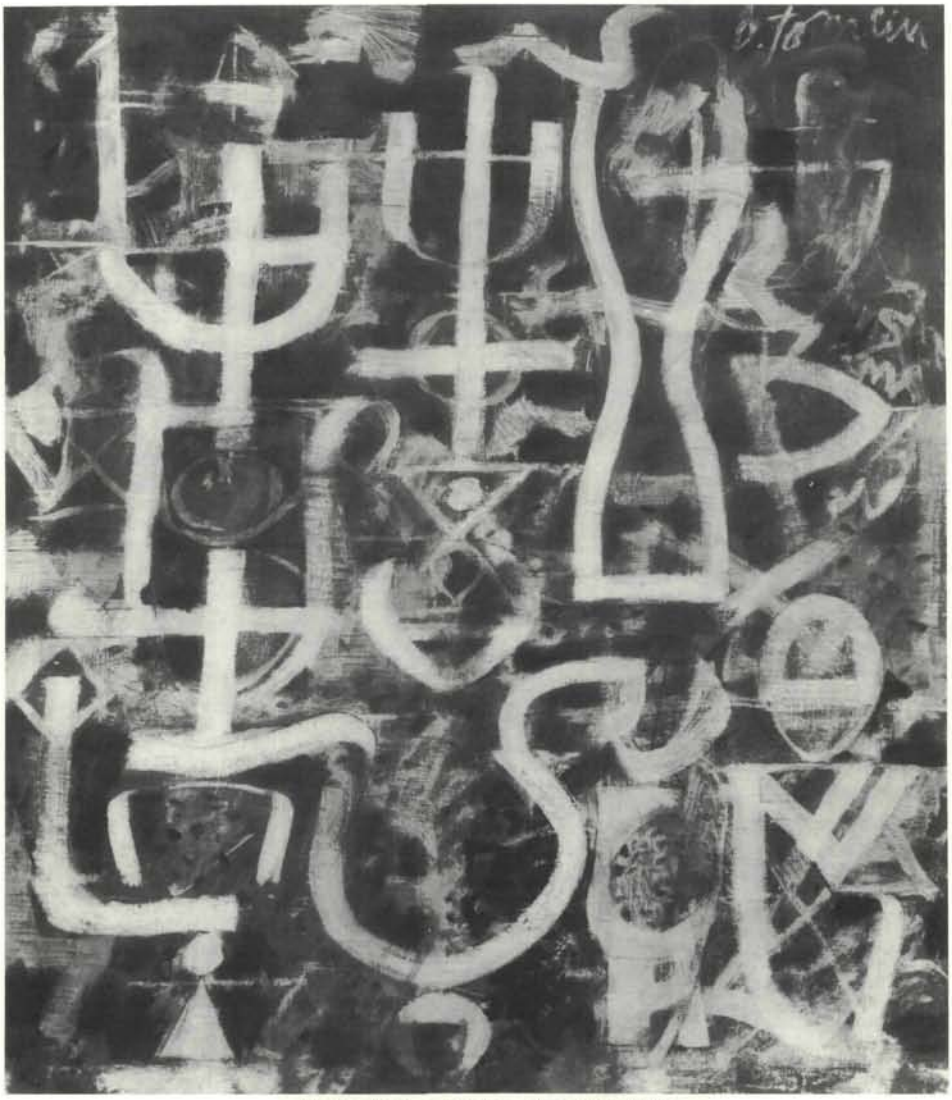

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The New Criterion *February 1988*

Editor *Hilton Kramer*

Publisher *Samuel Lipman*

Managing Editor *Erich Eichman*

Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*

Assistant Managing Editor *Donna Rifkind*

Office Manager *Maria Garvey*

Contributors to this issue

Bruce Bawer is the author of a forthcoming collection of essays entitled *Diminishing Fictions,* which will be published by Graywolf Press in the spring.

Joseph Epstein's new collection of literary essays, *Partial Payments,* will be published by Norton in the fall.

Joseph Frank is the author of three volumes of a biography of Dostoevsky: *The Seeds of Revolt, 1821-1849, The Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859,* and *The Stir of Liberation, 1860-1865* (Princeton).

Creighton Gilbert teaches art history at Yale University.

Donald Hall's most recent book is a collection of stories, *The Ideal Bakery* (North Point Press).

Samuel Lipman is the author of *Music After Modernism* and *The House of Music.*

Dana Mack is a doctoral candidate in history at Columbia University.

Jed Perl's study of French art after World War One, *Paris Without End,* will be published in the fall by North Point Press.

Theodore Prescott is a sculptor living in rural Pennsylvania.

Eva Resnikova writes regularly on dance for *The New York Observer* and *The New Criterion.*

Donna Rifkind reviewed Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way* for our November issue.

Deborah Solomon is the author of *Jackson Pollock: A Biography,* published last summer by Simon & Schuster.

George Szamuely was formerly an editor at the London *Times Literary Supplement.* He has written for *Commentary, The Wall Street Journal,* and other publications.

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Adolf Dehn, *Contacting Pablo Picasso,* 1940, lithograph

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The Anselm Kiefer retrospective

by Hilton Kramer

It was to be expected that the Anselm Kiefer retrospective, which opened at the Art Institute of Chicago in December, would be accorded a rapturous reception, and so it has been.[1] Throughout the nineteen-eighties, as the art market soared and an almost unencompassable quantity of meretricious painting glutted the galleries, the museums, and the public consciousness, the emergence of a new master—an artist who could be seen as transcending the more compromising scenarios of the new art scene—was anxiously awaited. And no sooner was the need for such a redemptive figure openly acknowledged than a consensus of sorts seemed to settle on Anselm Kiefer as the leading candidate. This young German painter, born in 1945, seemed to have everything that the role called for: talent, vision, ambition, dignity, and the kind of gravitas that was so conspicuously lacking in so many other artists who were swamping the scene. He even seemed to be in possession of that rare thing in contemporary art: an interesting mind. Most important of all, however, was the fact that Kiefer had a subject guaranteed to win the nervous attention of the entire Western world: the nightmare of the Nazi era and its meaning for European civilization. Both the subject and Kiefer's handling of it conferred an almost instant distinction on the artist, and he quickly became one of the mythic figures of the international art world.

In New York, remarkably, it wasn't even held against him that he exhibited his work at Mary Boone's. From the outset he was exempted from the usual strictures as critics hastened to register their approval—and their awe. It therefore came as no surprise when, in reviewing the current retrospective in *Time,* Robert Hughes—on this occasion, as on so many others, voicing the established opinion as if it were a personal discovery—hailed Kiefer with the kind of praise ("the best painter of his generation . . . an unmistakable greatness of vision . . . a victory for the moral imagination") usually reserved for the likes of Titian, Rembrandt, and, well, Lucien Freud. The stampede was on. Or, to alter the metaphor, a canonization was in progress. Critics from far and wide descended upon Chicago to attend the press view of the exhibition as if it were a religious obligation, and many remained—not so much looking at the show as transfixed by it—far longer than is usually the case with such events. The atmosphere at the press view was in fact exceptionally solemn and respectful, and to the note of reverence that dominated the occasion there was added

1 The Kiefer exhibition, jointly organized by the Art Institute of Chicago and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, was shown in Chicago from December 5 to January 31. It will be on view in Philadelphia from March 6 to May 1, and will then travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (June 14-September 11) and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (October 17-January 3, 1989).

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at times a discernible element of intellectual anxiety as the large, stately galleries of the Art Institute took on the air of an examination hall in which the critics could be observed checking with the curators and with each other to see who might have the right answers. It would have been unthinkable in such a hushed and reverential atmosphere to crack a joke, especially a vulgar one—which, as a matter of fact, is what critics often do at such events—and everyone seemed agreed that the one thing that would not be mentioned, despite the Mary Boone connection, was the artist's prices. You do not mention money in such sanctified surroundings. I have been going to the press views of museum shows for more than thirty years, and I've never seen anything to equal the solemnity of this one.

Given this response, it is a mercy, of course, that Kiefer's work is as good as it is. It may be premature to speak of his "greatness," and victories of the moral imagination are not, I think, to be so quickly proclaimed, but Kiefer is undoubtedly an artist of extraordinary gifts. The critical questions to be answered are: What exactly are those gifts, and what has the artist accomplished with them? That he is undaunted by the challenge of very large subjects—whole areas of German history, mythology, and culture, and the peculiar modalities of German social pathology, all of which remain, as far as their art is concerned, a closed book to the majority of contemporary artists—does not necessarily mean that Kiefer has been consistently successful in finding a way to deal with such subjects as a painter.

The secret of Kiefer's immense appeal just now—if, indeed, it can be described as a secret—lies, I believe, precisely in his willingness, or, if you will, his compulsion to place these subjects at the center of his art. To the degree that we sense in this compulsion something authentic and involuntary—an impulse that goes beyond anything we have lately come to associate with the tasks of art—it speaks to our own appetite for an art that transcends the aesthetic, and it is natural that we should be exhilarated by our initial encounters with it. As I share in that appetite, at least some of the time, I have a certain sympathy for artists who are driven to minister to its needs, and Kiefer is clearly one of them. (He may even, in this sense, be "the best" in his generation—but where, alas, is the competition?) Yet as I am also aware of how easily such an appetite for the extra-aesthetic is nowadays satisfied—and how short-lived such satisfactions so often turn out to be—I tend to be wary of the kind of art that makes its appeal in the name of something other than art.

But is this, in fact, what is actually going on in Kiefer's art? Or is his status as a visionary with something important to tell us about history and the human condition a phenomenon that has been imposed upon a body of work that cannot finally support the heroic role that is now being assigned to it? I count myself among Kiefer's admirers, but what I admire in his art does not seem to have much to do with what so many others see in it, or claim to see. For in my view Kiefer is an artist who demonstrates over and over again what, in the last years of the twentieth century, the *limits* of art—particularly the limits of the art of painting—now are when it comes to dealing with the great moral and historical issues of the modern era.

That Kiefer has made a determined and sometimes inspired effort to test and transcend these limits is, it seems to me, undeniable. That he brings immense reserves of energy, imagination, and invention to bear on his quest for a meaning "beyond" art is certainly to be accounted a significant part of his artistic enterprise. But the quest itself has an essentially Sisyphean character; it is its destiny to be repeatedly defeated. It is this pattern of Sisyphean defeat that gives to Kiefer's art its special poignancy—a poignancy, it must be said, that is not always clearly distinguishable from a certain mode of German sentimentality. The spiritual yearning in Kiefer's work is something that we are all made to feel. There is no way to miss it, if only because it is given such elaborate, operatic trappings. But in neither art

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nor life are yearnings to be mistaken for realizations. And in art at least, it is only realization that counts. Everything else—even the most exalted yearnings—belongs to the realm of failed dreams.

Kiefer paints—or perhaps one should say constructs, for he uses all sorts of materials—three types of pictures: landscapes, images of architecture, and what might be called didactic diagrams or charts. Many are of immense size, most conform to a bleak and mournful palette of blacks, grays, and earth colors, some—quite a few—have words inelegantly painted onto their surfaces, and all are weighted with symbols drawn from history, mythology, literature, folklore, or the artist's own biography.

The best of these paintings are the more recent symbolic landscapes: *Nuremberg* (1982), *The Mastersingers* (1981-82), *Midgard* (1980-85), *The Book* (1979-85), *The Order of the Angels* (1983-84), *Emanation* (1984-86), and *Jerusalem* (1986). The least successful are certain of the didactic-chart paintings—*Ways of Worldly Wisdom* (1976-77), for example, which is said to commemorate, with appropriate irony, the victory of the ancient Germans over Roman invaders at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in the Year A.D. 9. I must confess to having no interest in the subject, and the ponderous ineptitude with which the painting is executed, even if intended as a mockery of the theme (but how can one tell?), does not offer much in the way of aesthetic compensation. Kiefer's gift is the characteristic German gift for graphic images, but wherever his subject calls for the representation of faces or figures—*Ways of Wordly Wisdom* is almost all faces—he shows himself to be a very inadequate draftsman. His drawing is always at its best—which is to say, most powerful and moving—where it serves, as it does in the symbolic landscapes, to provide his paintings with a simplified, overscale format. It is drawing that takes little interest in the subtleties of pictorial space —as we can see at a glance in the macabre architectural paintings. If not for their references to the architecture that Albert Speer created for the Nazi regime or their other historical allusions, the architectural paintings would have to be considered eccentric variations on familiar academic themes. Even with their highly charged "content," I am not sure they escape a descent into pictorial cliché. It is, in any case, on the basis of the symbolic landscapes—and on certain works on paper that are related to them—that Kiefer is likely to survive and develop as a significant artist. The architectural paintings are a dead end, and the didactic charts and diagrams have already been abandoned.

It is in the contemplation of nature that Kiefer's pictorial imagination seems to attain an expressive freedom it does not enjoy in relation to his other subjects. For the German imagination, nature is not always a realm entirely distinguishable from culture. In Kiefer's painting, certainly, nature is by no means free of the darkness of history that is his abiding obsession. It is deeply implicated in the myths of a culture that has conferred so many spiritual or symbolic meanings on natural phenomena that the life of the earth seems at times to have been stripped of its independent existence. Which is to say that for Kiefer, as for so many German artists, nature is an allegory—a world of spirit as well as a realm of organic materiality—and it is in the effort to encompass its double nature, so to speak, that his landscape paintings achieve their special distinction.

There is much about these landscape paintings that identifies them as belonging to the Neo-Expressionist school—not only their oversize, "heroic" scale, but their curious mix of materials: straw, lead, sand, crockery, etc. In Kiefer's case, however, we are always made to feel that something akin to a systematic iconography is what governs this use of materials even if we cannot instantly identify the exact iconographic use to which they are being put. More often than not, there is in these landscapes an overload of materials attached to their surfaces that makes the paintings look heavy, ponderous, and overworked in the

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Neo-Expressionist manner. Yet in Kiefer's case, these excesses appear, paradoxically, to be in the firm control of a very particular vision—a vision that is mystical in the German style, turning every material perception into a metaphysical conundrum.

About this whole aspect of Kiefer's work, the wonderfully detailed catalogue that Mark Rosenthal has written to accompany the exhibition is an indispensable guide.[2] James N. Wood and Anne d'Harnoncourt, in their Foreword to the catalogue, speak of Mr. Rosenthal's lengthy text as "an essential tool for our understanding of the quotations and iconography that are central to [Kiefer's] work, much as a skillfully annotated edition of *Ulysses* aids the reader of Joyce," and they are right to do so. On everything from the kind of use Kiefer has made of Caspar David Friedrich and Jackson Pollock to his relation to Joseph Beuys[3] to more specifically iconographic research—which buildings are referred to, what historical events or literary symbols or private experiences are invoked—Mr. Rosenthal can usually be relied upon to give us the requisite information. In this respect, his catalogue is a triumph of art-historical scholarship. But, as is even the case with *Ulysses,* such aids to understanding esoteric allusions are not to be taken as a substitute for our experience of the work itself. Even when we find ourselves properly informed about the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, there is still the problem of what to make of *Ways of Worldly Wisdom* as a painting.

The landscape paintings are less problematic, to be sure, because they are so much more accomplished—so immediately compelling—as paintings. They have a power, at once pictorial and poetic, that is not dependent on our perfect understanding of their symbolism. Kiefer is an artist who imparts to every picture a characteristic emotion—an emotion that is relentlessly dour and obsessed with death—and you can't mistake it for anything else. Every painting sounds the requiem note, and the landscape paintings sound that note more effectively than any others.

Indeed, I think it is only in the landscape paintings that Kiefer has to some extent freed his painting from its dependence on hermetic symbolism and achieved the kind of archetypal expression he is searching for. The landscape paintings are wasteland paintings. They are scorched-earth images—images of an earth and a world that is rotting and returning to the primordial mud. They are images of a sublime that has "fallen" into decay. Their real subject is death, and the death that haunts them is as much the death of art as it is the death of the earth. All of this can be vividly—and indeed, insistently—seen in the so-called "books" that Kiefer has produced in such profusion, for what are these large sketchbooks or scrapbooks of images and non-images if not an avowal of the death of art in the face of the enormities of modern history?

In speaking of Kiefer's relation to Joseph Beuys, Mr. Rosenthal writes that Kiefer "undoubtedly gained from [Beuys] an enormous sense of mission and ambition, that is, the wish to grasp great regions of human history within the boundaries of his art." It is this sense of a great mission that has conferred on Kiefer's enterprise its enormous prestige. Yet in the celebration that is now being lavished on this gifted and unusual artist, we ought not to overlook the central place that the death motif occupies in the oeuvre that is celebrated. For myself, though my admiration for Kiefer is undiminished, I cannot say that I have been persuaded that he *has* succeeded in bringing "great regions of human history within the boundaries of his art." On the contrary, what this retrospective makes clear to this observer, at least, is that the object of Kiefer's Sisyphean quest continues to elude him.

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2 *Anselm Kiefer,* by Mark Rosenthal. The museum (paperback) edition is published by Chicago and Philadelphia at $24.95. The trade (hardcover) edition is distributed by the Neues Publishing Company at $35.00.

3 On Kiefer's relation to Beuys, see also Sanford Schwartz's article, "Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Ghosts of the Fatherland," in *The New Criterion* for March 1983.

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Tom Wolfe's vanities

by Joseph Epstein

American English is deficient in not having a word that, if not the antonym of *carpetbagger,* at least suggests the idea of traffic going the other way. The carpetbaggers, it will be recalled, were those northerners who headed south after the Civil War to cash in on the Reconstruction. The word I seek would describe those southerners—southern writers, specifically—who, nearly a century later, headed north to cash in by describing the period of American history that may someday go by the name of the Deconstruction. I say north, but I really mean Manhattan; I say Deconstruction, but I really mean that scrambling of ideals and morals, that blurring of meaning about fundamental matters, which has been so notable a feature of contemporary life in recent decades. Truman, Bill, Willie, Tom, these southerners headed north as if toward home, to play off the title of an autobiography written by one among them. To Manhattan southern writers have brought their dreams, their subtle feeling for the filigree of status life (for outside a beehive, no place is more abuzz with status than a southern town), and their churning literary ambition.

Many of these southern writers scored early and heavily, and some among them ended sadly and boozily. Midge Decter, who worked as an editor at *Harper's* at a time when it was dominated by southern writers, once remarked that these southerners could be very impressive, but, funny thing, they always seemed to want to stop for a beer. That is no mere *mot,* for alcoholism, from Thomas Wolfe on, has long plagued southern writers. But between Thomas Wolfe and Tom Wolfe there is a vast difference, and the latter, a southerner from Richmond, Virginia, appears never to have stopped for a beer or anything else, except a Ph.D. in American Studies at Yale, on the way to a quite extraordinary career in contemporary American letters. And in Tom Wolfe's case, a career, in the root sense of a course of continued progress, it has distinctly been.

A careful caretaker of this career, Tom Wolfe may be the only writer since Mark Twain to dress for the job. Two white-suited southerners, Twain and Wolfe resemble nothing so much as characters who have somehow wandered off the stage of a production of Jerome Kern's *Show Boat.* In another sense, of course, a showboat is a show-off, and there is a strong element of calling attention to himself, of sheer showing off, in Tom Wolfe's work. Plainspoken and decorous in his personal utterances, Wolfe has written as he has dressed, which is gaudily. If exclamation marks were dollars, he would already have spent a million. If italics were neon, his prose would long ago have suffered a power outage. If punctuation could be patented, he could lay claim to the double-decker, triple-length ellipsis, which looks like this: . . . . . Along with flashy punctuation, Wolfe commands a vocabulary made up of up-to-the-moment street talk, academic locutions, and fairly arcane medical

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terms that, mixed together, often result in an amusing verbal salad. Abrupt shifts, wild transitions, loony interjections, and other prose pyrotechnics are frequently set off just to make certain that no one sleeps while reading Tom Wolfe's prose.

If Wolfe's manner can be raffish, his method has always emphasized realism. Realism in Tom Wolfe's journalism has meant a concentration on the grain and texture of everyday life as brought out in its concrete details. It was the concentration on detail, as Wolfe himself has argued, that gave power to the novels of Dostoevsky, Dreiser, Dos Passos, and other realists, for the element of reporting has always been crucial to storytelling of all kinds. As a newspaper reporter—once out of graduate school, with an appetite for the real world that only graduate study can give, Wolfe worked for *The Washington Post* and then for *The New York Herald-Tribune*—Wolfe trained himself to pick up such details. I say "trained," but more likely he had a natural instinct for them, especially for those details that are important counters in what he once termed "the statusphere." Wolfe can determine the status nuance of the frames around the photographs atop the piano in the apartment of Leonard Bernstein, of the sound a Bonneville car door makes when closing, of the length of a radical's sideburn. This may seem to some people pretty small game, utterly trivial, mere *kakapitze,* but I, who find it all fascinating, am not among them.

Tom Wolfe also early showed a powerful aptitude for insinuating himself into the point of view of the people he wrote about. That takes work—"legwork," the old-line journalists used to call it—and, if you do it with as ambitious a range of characters as Wolfe has dealt with over the years, it also takes imagination. Point of view had long been the almost exclusive province of the novelist, but Wolfe was among those who first brought it into journalism. "The idea," he has written, "was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely, the subjective or emotional life of the characters." Wolfe used a straight point of view, shifting points of view, stream of consciousness, and every other literary device he could bring into play to enhance and enliven his journalism. The point was to lend journalism the density and intensity of literature while retaining the authenticity and excitement of dealing with real people and actual events.

This phenomenon of applying novelistic techniques to journalistic subjects came to be called the New Journalism. Tom Wolfe never claimed to have invented it, though he was its most energetic practitioner. A lot of it, you might say, was going around in the early 1960s. Some of the most prominent New Journalism was written by writers who were neither new nor trained as journalists. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), an account of the massacre of a prosperous Kansas farm family, was billed by Capote, who was a publicity genius, as a "non-fiction novel." Later, in 1967, Norman Mailer produced a book entitled *The Armies of the Night,* which he styled, in a subtitle, *History as a Novel, the Novel as History,* which is quite as nonsensical as it is inflated, apart from the obvious fact that Mailer, too, was using novelistic techniques—including writing about himself in the third person—in the production of autobiographical journalism. Gay Talese, Jimmy Breslin, and Hunter S. Thompson were also sometimes spoken of as New Journalists. But, as with all things that have the misfortune to be called new, the New Journalism, after a pretty good run of a decade or so, ran out of excitement.

Wolfe has argued that the New Journalism was able to generate the excitement that it did because the novel, after World War II, in effect vacated the premises by abandoning realism for sheer introspection or academic games-playing. True enough, there has, in American fiction, been a genuine *embarras de pauvreté.* True, too, many an American novelist eschewed the great subject of American society—and at a time when that society was undergoing the social whiplash of the Sixties and Seventies—to contemplate rather exclusively their own navels and parts below. In a

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lengthy introduction to an anthology entitled *The New Journalism,* Wolfe wrote:

> . . . about the time I came to New York, the most serious, ambitious and, presumably, talented novelists had abandoned the richest terrain of the novel: namely, society, the social tableau, manners and morals, the whole business of "the way we live now," in Trollope's phrase . . . . Balzac prided himself on being "the secretary of French society." Most serious American novelists would rather cut their wrists than be known as "the secretary of American society," and not merely because of ideological considerations. With fable, myth and the sacred office to think about—who wants such a menial role?

The novelist, in this reading, dropped the family jewels, leaving the (new) journalists to pick them up and pocket them for themselves.

After remarking that "*understatement* was the thing" among journalists and literati, Wolfe wrote that "by the early 1960s understatement had become an absolute pall." In his own journalism understatement was clearly out. It was out, too, in his discussion of the merits of the New Journalism, where Wolfe avoided it like Brooks Bros. At one point, claiming that the New Journalism offered all the techniques of literature along with the simple but overpowering fact that what the New Journalists wrote about *"actually happened"* (italics certainly not mine), Wolfe went on to claim that the New Journalist "is one step closer to the absolute involvement of the reader that Henry James and James Joyce dreamed of and never achieved." Now that, no question about it, is really pushing it.

Wolfe, who can compare the tedium of graduate school with "reading *Mr. Sammler's Planet* at one sitting, or just reading it," is rather more kindly disposed to the creators of New Journalism and neglects to mention criticisms against it. Jimmy Cannon, an old journalist, once remarked that "my main objection to some of them [the New Journalists] is that they make up the quotes. They invent action. When I was a kid we used to call it faking and piping, smoking the pipe, opium smoking." That the New Journalists make things up may or may not be true—it is usually unprovable in any case; more interesting is the related problem of the reader's not being able to determine whether or not the author, the New Journalist, actually saw what he is reporting or is instead reporting what other people have reported to him that they saw. An example will perhaps make the point less abstract.

In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), Wolfe's New Journalistic account of the pharmacological adventures of the novelist Ken Kesey and those who gathered around him in the early and middle 1960s, there appears a lengthy paragraph that, for sheer loathsomeness, has been accorded a place in a mixed-media production that sometimes plays in my mind that I think of as Great Moments From The Sixties. It is a paragraph devoted to a gang-bang—not, technically, a gang rape, in which the victim is unwilling—of a married woman (she is described in the paragraph as "just one nice soft honey hormone squash") by a band of Hell's Angels. Further details are not required for anyone with the least scintilla of imagination, though Wolfe supplies details in sufficient abundance to make one feel that, next to what went on in the shack in which this took place, hell itself would seem no worse than Club Med. But since we are talking about what *actually happened,* it seems fair to insist upon knowing if the man reporting it to us was *actually there.* And if he was actually there—I could be wrong, but I suspect that Wolfe wasn't—then is the quality of his description, which is meant to be objectivity set out before us through the point of view of the Hell's Angels, appropriate to the occasion? I don't think this is a trivial question.

One could raise other questions and objections about the New Journalism: because of the large outlay of energy in legwork it requires, it seems to be chiefly a young man's game; because of the equally large outlay of time required to do what Wolfe

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has called "saturation reporting," large expense accounts or publishers' advances or independent wealth are necessary; because the amount of snooping required is great, not to speak of that special journalistic appetite for biting the hand that feeds you (the hand, specifically, of one's subject, whose permission one needs for interviews and for merely hanging around), not every literary talent has the temperament needed for New Journalism. But these objections have been rendered moot by time and nugatory by fashion. For the New Journalism the caravan passed years ago, and even the dogs have stopped barking.

If interest in the New Journalism has faded, interest in Tom Wolfe has not. He has been able to ride out the waves of fashion on the surfboard of his own remarkable talent. Fashion is after all Tom Wolfe's subject. By identifying and then (usually) attacking what is currently fashionable, he has himself become not quite fashionable but certainly famous. No other writer of our day has put more phrases into contemporary speech. "Radical chic," "mau-mauing," "The Me Decade" are all Wolfe's coinages; the "Right Stuff," which he took from the speech of test pilots, today has the currency of full-blown cliché. "Wolfeian" has not thus far become a commonly recognized adjective, perhaps owing to the existence of Thomas and Nero Wolfe, but I myself have long begun to think of the phrase "to cry Wolfe" as shorthand for spotting a hot trend, shift in the current social scene, or new—my pen trembles in my hand as I prepare to set down the detested word—"lifestyle." Of the spread of the use of LSD in and around San Francisco in the early 1960s, and of the origin of the so-called Trip Festivals that initiated the psychedelic discotheques ("Civilization and its discotheques," Anthony Hecht once noted), Wolfe, in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test,* wrote: "But mainly the idea of a new life style was making itself felt. Do you suppose this is the—*new wave* . . . ?"

Tom Wolfe is pre-eminently the chronicler of those people who do not so much live lives as they live lifestyles—which is to say, of people who do not live life very deep down or authentically. They are often very savvy, even self-reflecting, about the way they live, but finally the style dominates the life. To this day I can recall a brief piece about an advertising man alienated from his son that appeared in Tom Wolfe's first book, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965), of whom Wolfe wrote that he, the man, whose name is Parker, called the short-brimmed, hard-crowned hat of the day a "Madison Avenue crash helmet." "He," Wolfe notes, "calls it a Madison Avenue crash helmet and then wears one." Of such people Tom Wolfe has made himself the leading connoisseur.

As a journalist, Wolfe has played the reporter who brings the news, some of it hot and new (as in the book on California drug culture), some of it not so new but interesting nonetheless because it has been wrongly neglected by others (as in *The Right Stuff,* his book on the heroism of American test pilots and astronauts). Easily the most stir-causing single piece of journalism Tom Wolfe has written in this mode is "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's," which appeared in *New York* early in the summer of 1970. That piece is, put simply, a devastation; it features that good old democratic joke, the rich making tremendous fools of themselves. In this case, it will be recalled, the fools in question were the guests of Leonard Bernstein and his wife Felicia—greater fools still, for allowing Tom Wolfe past their front door—who organized a fund-raising party for the most militant of 1960s militant revolutionary groups, the Black Panthers, in their, the Bernsteins', Manhattan apartment. It was an event that can be likened to a French comte and comtesse inviting Mme. Defarge and a few of her friends over to dinner, then calling back and reminding her not to neglect to bring along the guillotine. Doing one of his point-of-view turns, Wolfe writes:

> God, what a flood of taboo thoughts runs through one's head at these Radical Chic

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> events . . . . But it's delicious. It is as if one's nerve endings were on red alert to the most intimate nuances of status. Deny it if you want to! Nevertheless, it runs through every soul here. It is the matter of the marvelous contradictions on all sides. It is the delicious shudder you get when you try to force the prongs of two horseshoe magnets together . . . *them* and *us* . . . .

The political consequence of "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's" was to take radical politics off the celebrity social calendar. By giving the disease a name, and by exhibiting its symptoms through the powerful microscope of literary ridicule, Wolfe demonstrated the egregious contradictions, the spiritual vulgarity, the sheer idiocy inherent in reverse social climbing of the kind the Bernsteins and their guests thrilled to that night in Manhattan. After Wolfe's article had appeared in print, radicalism, at least as it was shown in the sexier news media, seemed to lose momentum and never again to have quite the same social luster.

Before the article about the party at the Bernsteins', it would not have been easy to say what Tom Wolfe's politics were. Writing about custom car designs, Pop Art collectors, stock-car drivers, rock'n'roll impresarios, the girl of the year, and other such subjects, Wolfe's political views did not seem a matter of pressing interest. Where they first became interesting was in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test,* his book about Kesey and the drug culture. LSD, after all, is not a subject upon which it is possible to remain neutral, or so at least one would have thought.

Yet in that book, which exhibits prodigious reportorial skills, one couldn't resist asking where Tom Wolfe himself stood in relation to the patent destructiveness of the drug culture. One couldn't resist asking because, in truth, after more than four hundred pages, one still didn't quite know. Wolfe's admiration for Ken Kesey, which runs very high, comes through in the book without equivocation. But did the worldly, then-young journalist also buy the mad talk about the higher consciousness that drugs were alleged to make possible? Was our author, to use a phrase much used in the book, himself on or off the bus—for or against what he was describing? Early in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test,* Wolfe wrote: "I feel like I am in on something the outside world, the world I came from, could not possibly comprehend, and it *is* a metaphor, the whole scene, ancient and vast, vaster than . . ." By the end of the book, Wolfe has not filled in that ellipsis; and those may be the most unsatisfactory three dots in contemporary journalism.

After "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's" appeared in *New York,* Tom Wolfe's own point of view ceased to be problematical in his writing. He also seemed to become interested in politics. Perhaps writing that article helped him to understand that politics, for so many people, fell within the domain of "lifestyle"—proper political views being for them the ideational equivalent of proper clothes, food, and furniture—and could no longer be ignored by a writer with his literary ambitions. Perhaps he had something like a political conversion brought about by an awareness of the extreme contradictions inherent in contemporary left-wing views. Certainly publishing his article on the Bernsteins' party, which blew a very shrill whistle on left-wing absurdity, made him a permanent enemy of the Left. The article also gave him national fame of a kind that nothing he had hitherto written had brought. Before writing "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's," Tom Wolfe was a stylish journalist; after the article, he was something of a celebrity, whose point of view, far from needing to be suppressed for vague, possibly bogus, journalistic reasons, was now of considerable interest in its own right.

Wolfe's own status changed from journalist—"working pest," as a wag I know likes to put it—to something akin to social observer. He continued to do a certain amount of saturation reporting of the kind he had earlier vaunted as the literary wave of the future—certainly *The Right Stuff* (1979) is a

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work of this kind—yet he now also did a turn or two at elaborate opinionation. In this realm, Wolfe was not about to fall into the journalistic trap of becoming a pundit; "paralyzing snoozemongers" is the way he had earlier described such pundits as Walter Lippmann and Joseph Alsop. Status and her sister Snobbery remained his key subjects, and comedy in describing their operation in the contemporary world his chief gift. As a social observer, he would charm through comic outrageousness.

Success, along with begetting success, begets confidence. It took confidence of high magnitude for Wolfe to take on his next subject, which was the contemporary art scene. *The Painted Word* (1975) is a comic sociology of that scene. In part, it delineates the relation of *le haut monde*—or *tout New York*—to visual art as "Radical Chic" delineated its relation to radical politics. In both instances an essential fraudulence lies at the heart of the relationship, with both radical politics and what passes for advanced taste in art allowing those rich and socially ambitious enough to dally with them to feel spiritual grace and gorgeousness of soul of a kind that sets them well above their class and even above the money that made it all possible to begin with. Wolfe plays all this for laughs, of which, as always when big money and social aspiration and culture get together, there is no paucity.

The Painted Word is an example—an extended essay on modern architecture, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981), is another—of Tom Wolfe operating in his emperor-has-no-clothes mode. He can be highly entertaining in this mode, except that he seems always to want to push things rather further than he ought. It is not sufficient to show that the emperor is undressed; it must also be pointed out that he has no knee-caps, clavicle, scrotum. Thus Wolfe, eager to show that the world he is depicting in *The Painted Word* is utterly fraudulent, must make everyone and everything in it a swindle. Thus, in his attempt to show the absurdity of much contemporary art criticism, he undermines entirely the relation of criticism to creation. Thus, in *From Bauhaus to Our House,* in his attempt to show that Walter Gropius and his European colleagues were utopian totalitarians, he all but asserts that all modern architecture is a hoax put over on Americans with a cultural inferiority complex. Throwing out the baby with the bathwater, along with being a cliché, is an old story; but when Tom Wolfe gets done, as in these two books, he has also removed the plumbing.

"Any work of art that can be understood," the line from the old Dada manifesto had it, "is the product of a journalist." It may well be that Wolfe's simplifications in *The Painted Word* and *From Bauhaus to Our House* are owing to his own training in journalism. Splendidly observant, intellectually alert, learned even (Dr. Wolfe, I presume), Tom Wolfe is an immensely entertaining writer, but he does seem to work almost exclusively in primary colors. Fine shading is not his specialty. His is not what one thinks of as a finely graded mind; the style he has developed is ill-suited to fine gradations. On the bloody, three-dot, italic contrary.

Which is not to say that, as a writer, Tom Wolfe is without subtlety. He is extremely subtle, but on one topic chiefly: status. Wolfe has written on an impressive variety of subjects and on an astonishing range of characters—I consider the range between Leonard Bernstein and Chuck Yeager astonishing—but whatever the subject, whoever the character, the real story for Wolfe is status: who stands where on the rubber ladder. A foxy sort of hedgehog, Wolfe has written about everything and yet always about the same thing. In his pages, talent, money, audacity, all are measured by, and are rewarded with, status. Preoccupied with status though Wolfe is, he has not thus far in his career seemed himself snobbish. (Freud, after all, was not a sex fiend, nor Marx a miser.) Wolfe simply believes—or so, on the basis of his writing, I gather that he believes—that it is status that makes the world go round.

Certainly, Wolfe sees status dominating literary life. Literary status, in his view,

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works through literary forms, or genres, and in his introduction to *The New Journalism* he mapped out a literary class structure with novelists at the top ("the occasional playwright or poet might be up there, too, but mainly it was the novelists"), the middle class occupied by the literary essayists and certain authoritative critics, with the journalists down in the low-rent district. "When we talk about the 'rise' or 'death' of literary genres," he went on to say, "we are talking about status, mainly." (I happen to think the subject is much more complicated than that, mainly, but this is no place for an essay-length footnote to prove it.) As Wolfe then (in 1973) saw it, "the novel no longer has the supreme status it enjoyed for ninety years (1875-1965), but neither has the New Journalism won it for itself. In some quarters the contempt for it is boundless . . . even breathtaking . . . ." Today the word "contempt" in that last sentence would have to be changed to "apathy."

Tom Wolfe has always liked to play being Jeane Dixon, shooting off predictions about forthcoming trends, and in his introduction to *The New Journalism* he predicted a new life for the novel, or, more precisely, a life for a new kind of novel:

> I think there is a tremendous future for a sort of novel that will be called the journalistic novel or perhaps documentary novel, novels of intense social realism based upon the same painstaking reporting that goes into the New Journalism. I see no reason why novelists who look down on Arthur Hailey's work couldn't do the same sort of reporting and research he does—and write it better, if they're able. There are certain areas of life that journalism still cannot move into easily, particularly for reasons of invasion of privacy, and it is in this margin that the novel will be able to grow in the future.

Fourteen years later Wolfe has made this prediction come true by producing precisely such a novel himself. To put it Wolfe-ishly, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*[1] is Tom Wolfe's bid to ***make it—now!*** . . . to break free from being a grubby journalist, however New and Glittering and Well Paid . . . and to become, are you ready for it, hey, give me a double (single-deck) ellipsis here . . . . . *Literature!*

Not long after reading Tom Wolfe's novel, I came across a reference to an event of the kind from which it takes its title—*The Bonfire of the Vanities*—in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus.* In describing the town of Kaiseraschern, in which the narrator and Adrian Leverkühn came of age, he, the narrator, remarks: "Rash it may be to say so, but here one could imagine strange things: as for instance a movement for a children's crusade might break out; a St. Vitus's dance; some wandering lunatic with communistic visions, preaching a bonfire of the vanities; miracles of the Cross, fantastic and mystical folk-movements—things like these, one felt, might easily come to pass." Savonarola, it will be recalled, beseeched the terrified citizenry of late fifteenth-century Florence to toss their vain personal ornaments, including books and paintings, into a symbolic fire—a bonfire of the vanities—that would purge their sins. Early in Tom Wolfe's novel, when he first describes his main character's sumptuous Park Avenue apartment, he remarks that it is a place of the kind "the mere thought of which ignites flames of greed and covetousness under people all over New York and, for that matter, all over the world." Right out of the gate, then, we are under advisement that symbolic flames will follow.

The Bonfire of the Vanities is an audacious book. Its ambition is grand and so is its scope, for it covers life at the high tables of Manhattan down to the lock-up at the Bronx County Courthouse. It is a hefty tome of 659 pages, which would make a

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1 *The Bonfire of the Vanities,* by Tom Wolfe; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 552 pages, $18.95. Farrar, Straus has also reissued in both hardcover and paperback the following titles: *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, The Pump House Gang, The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby,* and *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers.*

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fairly good bonfire of its own, and seems to be written in defiance of the notion that, if one wishes to make a major statement in our time, one had better make it short. It is audacious in yet another sense: it says things that no one else in our time has quite dared to say, at least not in print, not publicly. It posits that modern big-city life has become a jungle, full of danger and despair and disaster waiting to erupt. It further posits that there are men, some among them black men who are would-be leaders of their people, who profit handsomely from this arrangement. It has no regard for ethnic sensitivities, insofar as two of its most loathsome characters, both attorneys, are Jews, and makes the assumption that ethnic groups generally live among one another in a perpetual state of not very deeply suppressed animosity. Roughly midway through the novel, reference is made to three V.I.F.s. "'V.I.F.'s?' asked Sherman. 'Very important Fags,' said Judy, 'that's what everybody calls them.'" This, then, is not a novel that has set its sights on winning the B'nai Brith Human Relations Award.

Much of the negative press—in *The Nation, New York, The New Republic* (whose review carried the title "The Right-Wing Stuff")—that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* has received has been owing to its politics. These are strongly anti-Left, at least insofar as Wolfe attributes much of the serious mischief in contemporary urban life to radical hustlers and soft-hearted (also -headed) liberal culture of a kind unwilling to admit unpleasant facts about contemporary life. One such fact is that the New York City public school system is spiritually bankrupt, and its greatest victims are black and Hispanic kids. Of the students at the Colonel Jacob Ruppert High School in the Bronx, one Mr. Rifkind, a teacher with a minor role in the novel, remarks: "At Ruppert we use comparative terms, but *outstanding* isn't one of them. The range runs more from cooperative to life threatening." The same teacher says, "Written work? There hasn't been any written work at Ruppert High for fifteen years! Maybe twenty!" I would add that there hasn't been candor on such subjects, in our journalism or in our literature, for even longer.

Without an unblinkered view of reality, there can be no realism in literature. If one were to read the American fiction of the past few decades, one would be little likely to discover that large stretches of American cities are simply out of bounds to large segments of the population. Black or white, one can easily be killed in those streets. One can easily be killed, at least in spirit, in the media as well. One of the most terrifying moments in Wolfe's novel occurs as the members of the media are closing in on the main character, a successful bond broker named Sherman McCoy, who has been indicted for running over a black adolescent in the Bronx.

> They closed in for the kill. And then they killed him.
>
> He couldn't remember whether he had died while he was still standing in line outside, before the door to Central Booking opened, or while he was in the pens. But by the time he left the building and Killian [his lawyer] held his impromptu press conference on the steps, he had died and been reborn. In his new incarnation, the press was no longer an enemy and it was no longer *out there*. The press was now a condition, like lupus erythematosus or Wegener's granulomatosis. His entire central nervous system was now wired into the vast, incalculable circuit of radio and television and newspapers, and his body surged and burned and hummed with the energy of the press and the prurience of those it reached, which was everyone, from the closest neighbor to the most bored and distant outlander titillated for the moment by his disgrace.

Or, as Wolfe puts it in an earlier trope: "they were the maggots and the flies, and he was the dead beast they had found to crawl over and root into."

The Bonfire of the Vanities is about the wretched misadventures of Sherman McCoy (Buckley, St. Paul's, Yale), a man in his late thirties who lives in one of the best apartments in one of the best buildings on one of

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the best streets in the most important city in the world and who is earning only $20,000 shy of a million dollars a year and going broke. Sherman has a wife named Judy and a daughter named Campbell and a dachshund named Marshall and a southern mistress named Maria Ruskin, who is herself married to a rich, much older man, a Jew whose fortune is built on chartering flights for Arabs bound for Mecca. It is while driving Maria home from Kennedy Airport, in his Mercedes roadster (engine size, oddly, not noted), feeling masterful and atop the world ("There it [Manhattan] was, the Rome, the Paris, the London of the twentieth century, the city of ambition, the dense magnetic rock, the irresistible destination of all those who insist on being *where things are happening*—and he was among the victors!"), that Sherman misses the off-ramp to Manhattan and finds himself, beautiful woman beside him in a $48,000 car, in the Apache territory of the Bronx.

Lost in a maze of dark streets, Sherman, on a lonely ramp, is about to be accosted by two young black men. Out of the car, he fends one off, while Maria, now at the wheel, backs up the Mercedes, which knocks over the other. They then drive off. Although Sherman wants to report hitting one of the two young men with the Mercedes, Maria, reminding him of the complications this would cause—they are married, after all, and not to each other—persuades him, after a good bout of bonkering, otherwise. The boy who was hit by the Mercedes—he turns out to have been a high-school student—later goes into a coma and eventually dies. A Jesse Jackson-like figure named Reverend Bacon attempts to make great political hay over the incident, which, from the standpoint of the media, is a very sexy one: ghetto youth run over and killed by unidentified fleeing white couple in a Mercedes roadster. The main plot line of the novel is given over to the hunt, capture, and trial of Sherman McCoy for his part in the crime.

Tom Wolfe's handling of this material is altogether adroit. Cutting back and forth between five or six major characters, never lingering overlong with any one of them, or with the numerous subsidiary characters in this Russian-length novel, bouncing from social class to social class, subject to subject, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is neatly paced, without a longueur in the book. Whether an upper-class homosexual lawyer or a black drug dealer is talking, an English journalist or a Jewish cop, a maitre d' in a Manhattan Frog Pond restaurant or a lower-middle-class Greek bimbo, the dialogue in this novel always and everywhere feels right. The details are deft; a vast amount of information about the way (I won't say "we" but) some people live nowadays is dispensed. In sum, the book, as one thinks of them saying at editorial sales meetings, is a helluva read.

At this point, permit me to pose a question that I don't think will bore many people: How does a young man, not yet forty, without having a drug or gambling problem and with no one blackmailing him, manage to be going broke on an annual salary of $980,000? It isn't that difficult to spend more than $980,000 a year in current-day Manhattan, as Tom Wolfe demonstrates in perfectly persuasive financial detail. I shall not rehearse all the details here, but it may give some inkling of Mr. Sherman McCoy's problem to say that, for real-estate payments alone (loan repayments, mortgages, maintenance assessments, taxes) on a $2.6 million Park Avenue apartment and a house in Southampton, our boy is in for $368,000. Now toss in a few line items like $37,000 for restaurants and entertaining at home, $62,000 for servants (a nanny for the child, a cook and cleaning woman, a handyman for the place in Southampton), $65,000 for clothes and furniture, and a lousy $10,080 for parking two cars in Manhattan. You might think there is room for trimming things down here. $2.6 million might seem a bit high for a pad, for example, but Wolfe, most amusingly, shows how little in the way of quality in an apartment one gets these days for $1 million ("8½-foot ceilings, a dining room but no library, an entry gallery the size of a closet, no fireplace, skimpy lumberyard moldings, if any, plasterboard

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walls that transmit whispers, and no private elevator stop"). It's a problem, no doubt about it.

But let us talk a bit further about clothes. The dandiacal Mr. Wolfe not only dresses his characters with care—that one would expect—but tells us the name brands of their clothes, the prices paid for them, and often the shops in which they were purchased. Thus we learn about a rubberized British riding mac "bought at Knoud on Madison Avenue"; a soft leather attaché case of the kind that "come from Mädler or T. Anthony on Park Avenue"; sport jackets that are bought at Huntsman, Savile Row; Shep Miller suspenders; New & Lingwood shoes (lots of these), at New & Lingwood, Jermyn Street, London. Ah, me, in the 1890s dandies wrote for the *Yellow Book*; now they use the *Yellow Pages*.

Clothes perhaps weigh in too heavily in Tom Wolfe's reckoning of character. Some of his details about them, it must be said, are very sharp. A down-on-his-uppers British journalist named Peter Fallow wears a once expensive blazer that is beginning to show serious wear on its lapels; an assistant district attorney named Larry Kramer wears Nike sneakers and carries his Johnston & Murphy brown dress shoes in an A&P bag on the subway; the lawyer who defends Sherman McCoy, a man named Thomas Killian, always dresses to the nines (make that the thirty-sixes), and he is one of the few characters in the book of whom Wolfe approves.

Is this sound novelistic practice? In having Larry Kramer carry his not very elegant shoes to work in an A&P bag, Wolfe is telling us, here is a dullish man, without flair or imagination, the reverse of a sport, essentially lower-middle class, a clod—all of which Kramer turns out to be, as well as being cheap, lecherous, sycophantic, self-deluded, and dishonest. Could he not, though, have been quite as dreary in, say, an Alden tassled version of a full-strap slip-on in imported aniline calfskin? How would Henry James have handled it? What did Gilbert Osmond, that great snob, wear in *The Portrait of a Lady*? All James says by way of description is: "He was dressed as a man dresses who takes little other trouble about it than to have no vulgar things." Henry James lets Osmond dress himself, or rather lets us dress him in our own minds, but then James is fishing in deeper waters.

Henry James was interested in moral drama. Tom Wolfe is here interested in the drama of social status, of which he ultimately morally disapproves. Yet his fascination with the drama of social status is at least as great as his disapproval. In Henry James every decision has its moral price; in Tom Wolfe every piece of furniture has its retail price. In the drama of status, only one mode of thinking exists—that of comparison. Such a drama presents its players with a single problem—that of positioning themselves through their taste or wealth or political virtue or beauty or family standing. *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is a novel in which nearly every character searches for others down on whom he can look—and usually finds them. Take Larry Kramer, the assistant district attorney with the Johnston & Murphy shoes in the A&P bag. He and his wife, who has just had a baby, are living in an over-priced, jerry-built Manhattan apartment and have hired for a few weeks, at the rate of $525 per week, an English baby nurse, about whom Kramer feels rather edgy, until the nurse speaks out against "the colored," who don't know "how good they've got it in this country." The edge, with that remark, is off. Wolfe has Kramer and his wife think:

> Thank God in heaven! What a relief! They could let their breaths out now. Miss Efficiency was a bigot. These days the thing about bigotry was, it was undignified. It was a sign of Low Rent origins, of inferior social status, of poor taste. So they were the superiors of their English baby nurse, after all. What a fucking relief.

"Everyone is striving for what is not worth the having," says Lord Steyne, in *Vanity Fair,* a novel to which *The Bonfire of the Vanities* has not infrequently been compared. *Vanity Fair* carries the subtitle *A*

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Novel Without A Hero and this, by and large, is true, too, of *The Bonfire of the Vanities.* Among the crucial differences is that in Thackeray's novel not everyone is a swine, as nearly everyone is in Wolfe's, and in Thackeray there is still an aristocracy worth imitating whereas in Wolfe such aristocracy as America has known has by the time of the novel all but crumbled. (One of the subthemes of Wolfe's novel is the decay and decline of the WASP upper classes—and it is an important one.) In *The Bonfire of the Vanities* just about everyone has his own agenda, his own fantasies of money, power, sex, mastery, all issuing in greater status—which is to say, everyone has his own towering vanity. I cannot recall a generous emotion or sentiment in this entire novel; everyone in it is in business absolutely for himself.

"Vanity only sins," wrote Lord Lytton, "where it hurts the vanity of others." Much of the artfulness of Tom Wolfe's plot is owing to his skill at setting vanities clashing against one another. The horror of Sherman McCoy's fall is that his own vanity is chewed up by the vanity of a great many others: an alcoholic British journalist who sustains his career in the gutter press by sensationalizing McCoy's accident and trial; a corrupt black leader for whom McCoy's manslaughter case is a godsend; a Jewish district attorney up for re-election in a black and Hispanic district for whom a case like McCoy's is equated to bringing in the Great White Whale (accent on White); and so forth and so on. After the assistant district attorney Larry Kramer expends money, time, and great emotional energy on seductive strategy, finally making his move on a young woman he has fantasized about for months, we learn that she is in fact a bit of a tart, bored by his self-dramatizing and principally interested in popping into bed. When an older man in the company of a journalist has a deadly heart attack at La Boue d'Argent restaurant, his face falling into a plate of *médaillons de selle d'agneau Mikado,* his companion, after the tumult and mess of removing the body from the restaurant, is presented with (you will pardon my French) *l'addition,* which, truth to tell, he hadn't counted on paying in the first place. Another night—afternoon, actually—in little ole New York.

"Who is ever missed in Vanity Fair?" asks Thackeray, and I fear something similar can be said about the characters in *The Bonfire of the Vanities.* However interestingly and accurately they are drawn—and they are drawn most interestingly and accurately—one does not long to hear more from them. Wolfe has been altogether too efficient at his job of demolition. (Look, the emperor has no fibula, navel, buttocks!) Wolfe puts Sherman McCoy through the full hell of the so-called criminal justice system, exposes him to the complete torture of the media, fries him in betrayal, boils him in shame, and yet, so devastatingly has he earlier drawn him as a miserable mindless snob, that the redemption Wolfe allows him at the novel's close seems unpersuasive, which is a milder way of saying aesthetically unsatisfying.

It is very hard to write a novel with no hero without, at the same time, one's readers knowing exactly what it is you believe in. The author of *The Bonfire of the Vanities,* sad to report, is for the first time not always above the snobberies he depicts in his own work. He is not above mocking (in an unplayful way) New York accents, or belittling dreary apartments, or comically degrading a man who buys his clothes "from the Linebacker Shop, for the stocky man, in Fresh Meadows." When Wolfe lets his own point of view peep through, it isn't always pleasant to behold. His hatred for the high and vacuous celebrity culture is undisguised; his Olympian amusement at the nouveau riche has long been known. But what is surprising in his novel is to find him looking down his nose, as in the examples cited here, at the lower-middle class, or (as Marx neglected to call them) the *schleppoisie.*

The lower-middle class, my guess is, repels the dandy in Wolfe. Anyone who has ever seen Tom Wolfe's drawings knows that the quality of revulsion runs high in him. His drawings, with their ungracefully aging

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couples out jogging, their balding and ungainly intellectuals, their hopelessly overweight men on the disco dance floor attempting to hang in there with the young, their overdressed New York women who are all crotch and bust and bottom—all these drawings register pure disgust on Wolfe's part. As a penman, so as a draughtsman, he has always mocked other people's vanities, and the past few decades have kept him in full employment.

But does Wolfe believe in anything more than the need to skewer other people's vanities? "It is only to vain men that all is vanity," Joseph Conrad wrote in his story "Prince Roman," "and all is deception only to those who have never been sincere with themselves." In what does Tom Wolfe believe? Is there anything he admires? On the evidence of this novel, and of his earlier writings, I should say two things: command of craft and courage. Thomas Killian, the attorney in the novel who is good at what he does, is one of the book's few characters who is not mocked. Neither, finally, is another character, a judge named Myron Kovitsky, who in the social jungle of the Bronx is absolutely fearless and takes crap from no one. When craft and courage combine, as they do in test pilots and astronauts, stock-car racers and navy fighter pilots, Wolfe drops his guard and writes in open, uncritical adulation. It was Ken Kesey's crazy courage that in large part attracted Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test.* In *The Bonfire of the Vanities,* Sherman McCoy is redeemed when he finds the courage—physical as well as spiritual—to face down his attackers. (Admiration for physical courage traditionally runs strong in southern men.) If one views the world as essentially a fraudulent place, a vanity fair, then perhaps all that one can trust are courage and craft. And yet this seems, for a novelist, oddly limiting.

To his journalism, Tom Wolfe brought the techniques of the novelist, and now to his novel he brings the temperament of the journalist. The latter arrangement turns out not to work quite so well as did the former. The journalist acquires his information in order to choose sides; the novelist acquires his information not for the purpose of choosing sides but for exploring human character. *The Bonfire of the Vanities,* impressive in so many ways, is nonetheless an almost paradigmatic case of the way that the journalistic mind works. The characters in the book are all fictitious but none, so far as the author is concerned, is ever really innocent, or capable of surprising, or of teaching us anything about life.

The best qualities of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* are, at their core, journalistic ones: reams of fascinating information about the way people live, the way institutions work, and the way people can be ground down by both institutions and their own empty vanities. Novelists who ignore making use of such material by considering it merely journalistic are very great fools, but the serious novel, while including all this, goes beyond it. The difference, ultimately, between the novelist and the journalist is that the real subject of the novel is the truths of the human heart. Our greatest novelists have always known this, and now the greatest journalist of our time, who has missed this essential point, has proven it yet again.

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Schoenberg and the battles of modern music

by Dana Mack

For more than seventy years, Arnold Schoenberg's student Egon Wellesz (1885-1974) occupied a position at the center of international musical life. Composer, scholar, critic, teacher, Wellesz was co-founder, with Rudolf Réti, of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM), but he was as at home with the tropes of Byzantine church music as he was with the rules of twelve-tone technique; as erudite in his understanding of the music of Ravel and Milhaud as he was staunch in his defense of his teacher (he was Schoenberg's first biographer); as comfortable in the halls of Lincoln College, Oxford, where he taught from 1940 to 1972, as in his native Vienna. Here was a truly cosmopolitan music figure, one who managed, in a world of swollen egos, to remain on good terms with everyone. And one who, suffering the trials of the Austrian political emigré on the eve of the Second World War, contributed much to the postwar reconstruction of Austria's musical life.

Among the many riches of Wellesz's correspondence—all of it preserved in the Austrian National Library in Vienna and none of it yet available to the public—there are several extraordinary letters, from the years 1921 and 1922, between Wellesz and major figures of the early modernist era, especially Arnold Schoenberg. These letters were the rare survivors of a 1938 Gestapo raid on the family residence in Vienna, in which much of Wellesz's early correspondence was lost. I am indebted to Elizabeth Kessler, Wellesz's daughter, for granting me access to the Wellesz archives, and to her husband Charles Kessler for providing me with faithful translations. The letters themselves offer us a fascinating glimpse of relations between the Schoenberg circle and various French modernists at a time when hopes for a fruitful international cooperation among serious musicians were at their highest. They also offer us a closer look at the very *un*cooperative man who was at the center of the modern era's great revolution in music: Arnold Schoenberg.

The occasion for most of this correspondence was Egon Wellesz's trip to Paris and London in the spring of 1922, undertaken for the purposes of establishing contacts and finalizing arrangements for the Salzburg Contemporary Chamber Festival that coming summer. This festival was to mark the formal beginnings of the International Society for Contemporary Music.

Wellesz's mission that spring was of great importance. One of the most striking cultural changes brought about by the First World War was the belief among serious musicians that the high culture to which they had devoted their lives was in an unprecedented state of crisis. Concert life was already dominated by a staid, self-contained, and accepted repertory; mass culture —the product of rapid postwar democratization and technological advances in music reproduction—loomed threateningly. The

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audience response to modernist works was so hostile that many composers felt that they could only secure an unprejudiced hearing for their works in a tightly controlled atmosphere, before cognoscenti. Within the Schoenberg circle steps were taken as early as 1918 to develop an audience sympathetic to new music. In Vienna, Schoenberg's Society for Private Musical Performances, whose members were required to display photo-identification cards at the door of the concert hall, epitomized the extent to which modernists perceived themselves to be in a state of siege.

But the ominous cultural climate was not the only problem. The Second Viennese School, the rubric by which Schoenberg and his disciples came to be known, struggled for recognition in a crowded urban atmosphere of hunger, rampant inflation, and political strife. The former imperial city—home to Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Bruckner, and Mahler—was so damaged by the ravages of war that it could now barely support the weight of its proud cultural tradition. And while the situation in Paris was not as dire as that in Vienna, there too war-weary artists and intellectuals felt hardship and isolation. Little wonder, then, that the modernists in both cities sought the support of international contacts, and that—inspired by Wilsonian ideals—they spoke of spiritual renewal through mutual inspiration.

As it happens, the new French music was much admired in the Schoenberg circle, though it was a rarity in Viennese concert halls (and remains so today). Wellesz's exposure to the music of Debussy, Ravel, and Satie dated from as far back as 1909, when he first met Jules Ecorcheville, the publisher of the *Revue Musicale.* During the war, of course, cultural contacts with the French had ceased, and many artists and intellectuals, including Wellesz, looked eastward for exotic inspiration.[1] But postwar cultural ties between the two countries informally resumed on the heels of the armistice, greatly facilitated by Berta Zuckerkandl, the sister-in-law of Clemenceau, who formed an influential circle of writers and journalists in her Viennese salon. In the following years, Schoenberg's interest in French music grew steadily, until it assumed a prominent place in the programs of the Society for Private Musical Performances. In this way, by 1921 anyone at the center of Vienna's musical life had already felt the musical pulse of Paris. What is more, between 1920 and 1922 Viennese musicians—most especially Wellesz—played host to the leading French composers of the day: among them, Ravel, Milhaud, and Poulenc.

For many French musicians, the German-speaking lands never lost their cultural importance, even during the war. Ravel had made clear his contempt for wartime cultural chauvinism when he wrote from the trenches, upon receipt of a petition to boycott the music of Wagner: "Venez defendre la France ici où je suis." ("Come defend France here where I am.") Many years later, in an essay in honor of Schoenberg, Milhaud would tell of the difficulty he had satisfying his appetite for German scores during the war. It was only Milhaud's association with Arthur Honneger—who bought Schoenberg scores on his visits home to his parents in Switzerland—that made possible Milhaud's early familiarity with developments in Viennese modernism.

One of Milhaud's first tasks at the close of the war was to undertake performances of Schoenberg's music. Here he was greatly aided by the pianist and impresario Jean Wiéner, who took up the cause of the Second Viennese School in a series of contemporary music concerts in Paris, and who engaged Milhaud to conduct the 1922 Paris premiere of *Pierrot Lunaire* which figures so prominently in the letters below.

Considering Schoenberg's activism in regard to new French music and the general climate of international cooperation, one might wonder at the following communica-

1 Wellesz engrossed himself in Eastern religious chant during the war; his discovery of the key to Byzantine musical notation was the beginning of a remarkable career as a scholar of ancient music.

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tion from Schoenberg to Egon Wellesz in 1921. It concerns Wellesz's invitation to Schoenberg to contribute to a special issue of the *Revue Musicale* in honor of Claude Debussy:

8 October 1921

Villa Josef
Upper Austria

Dear Dr. Wellesz,

Don't be cross with me, but no! I am an enemy of all such publications. They are no more than embellishments. I would gladly do *you* a favor—but not the French! Let them find culture on their own.

How are you? Have you heard that I have one of your ballets in mind for the drama evening of the Society for Private Musical Performances?

How very gratifying that your book [on Schoenberg] is being translated. Good luck! Best regards,

Your
Arnold Schoenberg

Schoenberg was something of a lone wolf and certainly not one to forgive Debussy his outspoken wartime nationalism. But more startling than the bitterness of his communiqué (Schoenberg was nothing if not acerbic and brusque, no matter the person or subject concerned) is its contentiousness toward the French cultural achievement. Here we see displayed the frightening conception of his sovereignty which was the hallmark of Schoenberg's professional life, the same conception which had led him to declare that previous summer that his newly discovered twelve-tone method of composition would "secure the superiority of German music for the next two hundred years."

Even so, Schoenberg understood the importance of making some impact on the French cultural scene, and he greeted the first performances of his works in Paris with enthusiasm and curiosity. The passion for the avant-garde which possessed Paris in the early Twenties invited exposure to Schoenberg's radical atonal experiments. And *Pierrot Lunaire,* the first of his works to be performed in Paris, was in many ways an ideal envoy for Viennese modernism.

The attractions of *Pierrot* were many. First, the piece was a child of French symbolism. Its unabashedly decadent text—*Pierrot* is a series of melodramas based on a cycle of poems by the Belgian poet Albert Giraud—would have had a provocative appeal for a French audience. Second, the piece was Schoenberg's most significant atonal effort to date, an effort which displayed his dexterity at lending clear compositional form to untamed dissonance. With its ground-breaking use of *Sprechstimme* (speech-song) and its naked use of such strict classical forms as the canon and passacaglia, *Pierrot* possessed a coolness which no other work of his Expressionist period displays. Finally, *Pierrot* is a work filled with self-irony. Its distancing quality was much more appropriate to the Parisian mood of the Twenties than, for example, an earlier Expressionist effort, Schoenberg's *Erwartung,* which is flooded with *fin de siècle* anxiety.

Pierrot's first performance in Paris, in January of 1922, was a success. Of course, its warm reception was due in part to the musicians involved—especially Darius Milhaud, who conducted, and Marya Freund, the Polish-born singer and renowned interpreter of contemporary music, both French and German. But it probably also helped that the work appeared in Jean Wiéner's Contemporary Concert Series, where the audience was prepared for advanced musical experimentation. Without doubt the general Parisian public was not ready for Schoenberg. When his *Five Orchestral Pieces,* Opus 16, was performed four months later it created a scandal, as Wellesz attests in the letter below—on his way to proposing a choreographed version of *Pierrot.*

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17 May 1922
London

Dear Herr Schoenberg:

It gives me great pleasure to tell you that *Pierrot Lunaire* is enjoying quite exceptional success in Paris. Everyone talks about it and the musical world is spellbound. The *Orchesterstücke* were also a great success regardless of the fierce disputes following their performance, or perhaps precisely on that score. A large part of the critics present championed the work with unsurpassed enthusiasm, Florent Schmidt [sic] in particular.[2] He was led from the hall with profuse nose-bleeding after being struck in the face by a man whom he had taken to task for his dissenting behavior.

And now to the most important point:

Massine, the best Russian dancer, has been to see Milhaud and told him that he would like to choreograph *Pierrot* just as he did with Stravinsky's *Rossignol.*

It would stand on its own and almost certainly be assured of enormous success as Massine is an altogether outstanding personality. Milhaud could conduct, but he and I would suggest that you do so on the first night. The cost of the trip would—we have been promised—be defrayed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Massine asks you to let him have your answer (in German, of course) as soon as possible so that he can start studying the score . . . .

With kindest regards to your wife and best wishes, I remain respectfully yours,

Egon Wellesz

Many years later Wellesz identified Florent Schmitt's attacker as the hot-tempered playwright Henry Bernstein (1876-1953). Curiously, Bernstein's own work displayed some of the preoccupations of Schoenberg's dramatic efforts. Like Schoenberg in *Moses und Aaron,* Bernstein bewailed the materialism and godlessness of the modern age, the seductions of the golden calf.

That the *Five Orchestral Pieces* (1909)—so rich in chromatic invention and late-Romantic expression—could spark a row between two prominent Parisians as late as 1922 is astonishing. The work only begins to explore the universe beyond tonality. In fact, where the *Orchesterstücke* are not broadly Mahleresque, they have some of the sonorous elegance that characterizes Debussy's adventures in non-functional harmony. Yet the reactions were indeed strong. On the very evening of their performance (April 22, 1922) Marya Freund wrote to Schoenberg of the "noise and excitement" they had caused.

Massine's proposal to dance *Pierrot*—passed along by Wellesz in his letter—is one of those curious "could have been" stories that capture the imaginations of music historians and biographers. As Nijinsky's successor at the Ballet Russe, Massine held a pivotal position in Parisian cultural life. His professional daring would in itself have made him an ideal propagandist for Schoenberg's work among the French ballet-crazed public. What is more, Schoenberg and his disciples were hardly immune to the attractions of the ballet. Especially in the first decades of the century, they often occupied themselves with (mostly unrealized) dance projects.

But Massine's apparent intention of reprogramming *Pierrot* so that his choreography would replace the work's text presented Schoenberg with a knotty problem. On the one hand, Schoenberg had always insisted on the primacy of *Pierrot*'s instrumental parts and their ability to stand on their own as independent reflections of Giraud's vivid poetic images. On the other hand, the very newness of the *Sprechstimme* technique, combined with the striking peculiarity of

2 Florent Schmitt (1870-1958)—the French composer, pianist, and music critic—was a student of Massenet and Poulenc, and winner of the Prix de Rome in 1900. According to *The New Oxford Companion to Music,* he composed "prolifically" for the orchestra. Among his more important works are *Psalm Forty-seven,* for soprano, chorus, and orchestra, and a ballet entitled *The Tragedy of Salomé.*

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text, accounts for a good part of the work's eerie atmospheric power. The letter below shows Schoenberg's frustration in trying to imagine the work with the new dance elements:

30 May 1922

Modling bei Wien
Bernhardgasse 6.

Dear Dr. Wellesz,

Many thanks for your highly interesting letter.

I can't fathom Massine's intention—that is not meant as a ***rejection,*** but simply that I am asking for a more detailed ***explanation.***

The immediate problems to my mind are:

1. The recitation can surely not be omitted?!
2. Is it feasible to dance and to speak at the same time when presumably

a. the sound of the dancing would smother my delicate instrumentation

b. but a heavier instrumentation would muffle the speaker?

As you see, I am either completely on the wrong track in trying to conceive what he has in mind or need to have additional information.

Anyhow, perhaps Herr Massine will let me know what he proposes, but so precisely as to enable me to make things out and to decide.

Once again, I am not by any means refusing, but *just don't yet understand.*

Can you get for me reviews of the *Orchesterstücke.* And of *Pierrot*?

Have you talked to Clark?[3] Have you asked him why he hasn't answered me? Or why he doesn't want to do anything for Webern? Tell him I would be sorry to have to interpret his silence as an "unfriendly act." But if he does not decide soon, I shall have to.

I would dearly like to lay a verbal balsam on Florent Schmitt's bloody (or rather, hopefully, bloodied) nose incurred on my behalf, but don't have his address. I am really furious. A thing like that is only possible here, but doesn't happen; whereas in France it isn't possible, but happens. Perhaps you will have an opportunity of telling Florent Schmitt something for me: boundless pride at having such a friend is only exceeded by my regret at the incident; but an additional view is tenable too—delight at the championship of myself by one who has received a slap in the face of humanity.

When will you be in Vienna again? Warm regards,

Your
Arnold Schoenberg

This is an interesting letter in a number of respects. Beyond expressing the composer's curiosity about a ballet version of *Pierrot* and his delightfully philosophical view of the scandal in Paris, it shows the urgency with which he regarded the matter of Webern's London prospects. Here he is offering Wellesz a not so subtle reminder that Wellesz's mission abroad should include the promotion of music produced by the Schoenberg circle. The letter is also an extraordinarily vivid and concise imprint of Schoenberg's personality. His quickness to take offense, even where as loyal a missionary as his former student Edward Clark was concerned, is legendary. In part, it was a natural response to the difficulties that he and his circle encountered in getting their music published and heard. In part, however, it was a product of his refusal to acknowledge the insurmountable obstacles that stood between him and a musical public. The Society for Private Musical Performances did not shy from using the word "propaganda" to describe its aims and activities. What Schoenberg expected from his supporters was nothing less than that sort of systematic, dogged effort which had enabled him and the Society to defy starvation, inflation, and public apathy for three years.

With the Massine proposal on hold, Wellesz focuses in reply on the possibilities of presenting *Pierrot* in London. Along the

3 Edward Clark was a former Schoenberg pupil. A conductor, impresario, and important figure with the BBC, Clark was responsible for introducing many Second Viennese School works to the British musical public.

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way, he reveals some of the harsh realities of London musical life. They must have given Schoenberg pause for thought:

1 June 1922

London NW1
Cumberland Terrace

Dear Herr Schoenberg,

Many thanks for your kind letter. I have written to Arthur Honneger in Paris, asking him to send you Fl. Schmidt's [sic] address and to see that you get the reviews.

I have also written to Massine and hope that he will contact you directly.

Because Marya Freund has asked too much for a London performance of *Pierrot,* the planned appearance of the Parisian company will not take place here. This makes it easier for me to put forward my proposal for an invitation to the Vienna Ensemble. I have spoken to a young concert agent who is pinning his whole ambition on realization of this project. I think there is a definite likelihood of it.

I have whenever possible shown Webern's pieces to musicians here and have likewise talked to publishers . . . . I am hopeful, though, that a new, very good American publisher whose representative was here and who is also in touch with Universal Edition [Webern's publisher in Vienna] about European business will take the pieces. The name is Composers International Co.

I met Clark. He has lost all his money on his concerts and, as everyone tells me who knows him, is therefore in deep waters. Don't take offense at his not having answered. He was probably too shame-faced to tell you how things are, but nonetheless is now going to try and do something. Musical affairs here are altogether infinitely more complicated and bleaker than at home. You have to have been here to appreciate how things really stand.

I shall tell you more when I am back. My compliments to Frau Schönberg and regards to Webern and Berg.

Your
Egon Wellesz

Of particular interest here is the reference to the temporary failure of negotiations for a performance of *Pierrot* in London by Milhaud's Paris ensemble. (The performance did in fact take place, twice, in March of 1923.) The tone of Wellesz's letter implies competition between Milhaud's ensemble and Schoenberg's own Vienna ensemble, which had emerged from the Society for Private Musical Performances.[4] In the summer of 1922, plans were solidifying for a Vienna-ensemble tour of several European cities. But at the root of Schoenberg's and Wellesz's concern was not simply who would win the race to London but rather how to handle Schoenberg's strong objections to Marya Freund's interpretation of *Pierrot.*

A few months before, during the winter of 1921-22, Schoenberg had had a chance to hear the Paris version of the piece when Milhaud, Freund, and Francis Poulenc were in Vienna to give some concerts of French music. A reception in their honor was held one afternoon at the home of Alma Mahler Gropius, where the two *Pierrot* versions were juxtaposed, much to Schoenberg's disappointment and dismay.

According to witnesses (principally Wellesz and the pianist Edward Steuermann) the differences in Marya Freund's and Erika Wagner's performances were startling. Most salient among them was Freund's tendency to sing rather than speak her part, a practice to which Schoenberg strongly objected. (Interestingly enough, it was precisely this pitch-exact element of Freund's interpretation which posed the most problems for Milhaud. After giving the much postponed London performances of *Pierrot* in March of 1923, Milhaud gave up the piece with the lament that his nerves were raw from having to listen for unexpected intervals in the vocal

4 The Vienna ensemble's interpretation, conducted by Schoenberg and featuring the soprano Erika Wagner, has been immortalized on the Columbia label (ML4471) and recently re-released by Columbia Odyssey in the Composers as Performers Series (Y3379).

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part.) Freund was a valued friend and renowned interpreter of Schoenberg's music; nevertheless, Schoenberg did not hesitate to take her to task for her unorthodox treatment of the vocal line. In a letter of mid-August (1922)—printed in Erwin Stein's edition of the *Selected Letters of Arnold Schoenberg*[5]—he declared his desire to "do some thorough rehearsing" with her, explaining:

> I cannot allow any will but mine to prevail in realizing the musical thoughts that I have recorded on paper . . . . Realizing them must be done in such deadly earnest, with such inexorable severity, because the composing was done just that way . . . .

For Schoenberg, then, the seeds of distrust toward a French-sponsored dissemination of his work were sown well before Massine's offer to choreograph *Pierrot*. And it didn't help that negotiations were undertaken in a manner that can only be termed over-solicitous. In any case, Massine never approached Schoenberg directly, but rather chose the auspices of Alma Mahler Gropius through his friend Milhaud. According to the Stuckenschmidt biography of Schoenberg, Alma played a significant role in this rather complex diplomatic chain. It was she who informed Schoenberg of the particulars of Massine's plans, and it was also she who received his negative final decision on the matter, dated July 5, 1922:

> I have surely given proof of being no formalist in matters of casting . . . but to perform *Pierrot* without recitation . . . does strike me as going too far. I don't think I'm being pedantic about it, even if I haven't much more to say against this transcription than against any other. Anyway, I should have to do such a symphonic version myself, in order to conduct it myself. In such a case one has to take the entire responsibility. But it isn't a job I feel any enthusiasm for. I'd rather write Massine something new—although not immediately. If Milhaud wants me in Paris, either *Erwartung* or *Die glückliche Hand* can provide the occasion. These premieres I should have to conduct myself . . . .[6]

This letter continues with a request that Alma "pass on" the answer to Milhaud. "I'm afraid of doing it too undiplomatically," the composer insisted. "Milhaud . . . is, after all, a nice person." Curiously, the news took a while to reach Milhaud, who informed Wellesz in a letter dated July 23 of Massine's continued interest in the project.

At any rate, by the end of the summer the chances for a Ballet Russe *Pierrot* faded, and with them a potential boon to Schoenberg's international reputation. But the fall of 1922 still offered its fill of opportunities for the Vienna ensemble. In September, Anton Webern, who was then taking over from Schoenberg as director of the Society for Private Musical Performances, broached once more its never to be realized plan to bring *Pierrot* to London:

> 2 September 1922
>
> Traunkirchen
>
> My dear Dr. Wellesz,
>
> . . . Thank you for your news . . . . I am so sorry that you have been subjected to personal attacks. I must also express my heartfelt thanks for your taking up my cause at Salzburg.[7]

5 *The Selected Letters of Arnold Schoenberg,* edited by Erwin Stein; Faber & Faber (London), 1964, p. 74. The University of California Press published a paperback edition of the book in 1987 (310 pages, $12.95).

6 Stein, page 69.

7 Here he refers to the scandal unleashed by the performance of Webern's *Five Movements,* Opus 5 at the Salzburg Contemporary Festival on August 8. The *Movements,* performed by the Amar Quartet (of which Hindemith was a member), provoked a rumpus which finally had to be broken up by the police. See the Moldenhauer biography of Webern, *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of His Life* (1978), for a detailed and amusing recounting of the event, in which the architect Adolf Loos emerges as a heroic defender of Webern.

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> Now a request:
>
> It is high time to have some specific proposals about the visit to London by the Vienna *Pierrot* ensemble (under Schoenberg's leadership). You will recall my mentioning the 8 December engagement at Amsterdam and how very advantageous such a follow-up guest appearance would be. Meanwhile a performance in Switzerland, to take place before that in Holland, has been firmly fixed—two evenings definitely at Winterthur and concerts in Geneva, Basle, and Zurich in the offing. Schönberg moreover has a date in Copenhagen.[8] So we must know as soon as possible how things stand as regards the London concerts so as to fix the itineraries . . . . What, please, have you found out and will you also be so kind as to pursue the matter further? . . . Please write me very soon . . . .
>
> With warmest greetings to you and your family from us,
>
> Your
> Anton Webern

The tone of this letter testifies once more to the importance which Schoenberg and his disciples—in this case, Webern—placed upon promulgating the master's work under the most carefully controlled conditions: authentic performances with hand-picked interpreters under the master's own supervision. Schoenberg's unwillingness to let go of his work, to allow interpreters to meet it on its own and on their own terms, bordered on the obsessive. (He was wont to say: "My music is not modern; it is merely badly played.") It is not surprising that his single effort at grand opera involved a struggle with the Moses theme. His mystical belief in the inevitability, purity, and rightness of his work was always colored by the conviction that it was particularly vulnerable to debasement and abuse.

Where people he liked were concerned, Schoenberg was sometimes able to sugarcoat his anxieties. He managed, for example, to avoid offending Milhaud, Freund, and Massine. But on the long road to his "becoming lonely" (to borrow from the title of one of Schoenberg's autobiographical essays) many a willing pilgrim to the promised land was rejected with unspeakable rudeness.

Consider the case of Edgar Varèse, whose infant organization, the New York-based International Composers Guild, claimed much the same aims as the incipient ISCM. Varèse contacted Schoenberg in the fall of 1922 with information and an invitation to join, announcing at the same time his intention of opening the Guild's concert season with a performance of *Pierrot Lunaire*. This is how Schoenberg responded:

> . . . from your manifesto and the programs of three concerts I gather that you have hitherto attached no importance to German music. No single German among 27 composers performed! So then you have been international to the exclusion of the Germans!
>
> What offends me equally, however, is that without asking me whether you can and may do so you simply set a definitive date for my *Pierrot Lunaire* . . . . In Vienna, with everyone starving and shivering, something like 100 rehearsals were held and an impeccable ensemble achieved with my collaboration. But you people simply fix a date and think that's all there is to it! . . . And you expect me to associate myself with it? No; I'm not *smart* [here Schoenberg used the English word] enough for that . . . . I am, of course, powerless and you can do as you like. But then kindly refrain from asking me about it . . . .[9]

Possibly the vehemence of Schoenberg's response stemmed from his hopes for the International Society for Contemporary Music. At least, it is unlikely that he would have been well disposed to any organization which posed competition to the ISCM; its founders were close to home and it seemed to offer a real prospect for aesthetic leadership at the very moment that his new twelve-tone method was emerging.

8 Schoenberg conducted his Chamber Symphony in Copenhagen on January 30, 1923.

9 Stein, page 79.

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As it turned out, the ISCM left much to be desired as a stage for the effort of the Schoenberg circle. Not even the Austrian section of the organization submitted willingly or easily to the domination of the Second Viennese School and its radical aesthetic direction. Still less could the Schoenberg circle influence the broader international association. Indeed, the re-assertion of German "hegemony" in musical life was all-important to Schoenberg, who complained in 1919 that "almost every 'modernist' is proud to claim Debussy as his forebear, while none wish to acknowledge taking anything from me or Mahler . . . . I'm not for the politicization of art [Kunstpolitik]; but I must repeat . . . that when I think of music, I think Germany . . . ." But this hegemony could hardly be achieved under ISCM auspices. The organizational set-up of separate national sections created an atmosphere rife with political considerations and nationalistic jealousies. The society's conscious efforts to acknowledge a catholicity of contemporary tastes and to propagate a democracy of nations equal under bylaw sowed the seeds for artistic compromise and conservatism. The ISCM quickly became the ideal object for Schoenberg's ever-ready contempt.

In 1925 Schoenberg even found sufficient cause to withdraw from the organization. Engaged to conduct his *Serenade* at the ISCM festival in Venice, he did not disdain indulging himself in contentious behavior. He ostentatiously left the hall where Stravinsky performed his Piano Sonata. He ran one hour beyond his appointed rehearsal time, refusing to respond to the pleas of the composer scheduled next for rehearsal. And when confronted by ISCM president Edward Dent's reminder, "Master, you must understand, you are not the only composer here," he answered: "Really? I thought I was." Thus ended Schoenberg's formal association with the ISCM for the next twenty-two years.

Hindsight suggests that Schoenberg's break with the ISCM was only confirmation of the demise of his former interest in international musical life, a demise which had begun as he found a footing in his new system of composition. At the base of his fleeting if vital fascination with French music had been an aesthetic crisis having to do with the dissolution of classical harmony and the progressive dissipation of tonal orientation in turn-of-the-century music. His intrepid wanderings in the labyrinths of expressionism in the second decade of this century—however fruitful and cathartic—could only have been undertaken as a temporary and extreme aesthetic direction from which he expected a balanced style to emerge. So that at that time, he must have found Debussy's tempered dissonances—nonfunctional harmonic sonorities rife with "blue" notes and yet touched by the most dignified spectrum of humors—refreshing.

But Schoenberg's most ardent desire was to solve his aesthetic dilemmas within the context of the German musical tradition. This was an achievement which he could only begin to claim by 1921, and his correspondence indicates that as late as 1922 he was still seeking out aesthetic alternatives. For example, in a letter of October 22, 1922, to Alexander Zemlinsky he gave the following advice in regard to programming for the Prague Society for Private Musical Performances:

> Now to . . . Milhaud . . . . [H]e strikes me as the most important representative of the contemporary movement in all Latin countries: polytonality. Whether I like him is not to the point . . . [and] not a question for the Society, which sets out *only to inform* . . . .[10]

But by 1925 Schoenberg's attitude had changed. He dispensed with his most formidable competition by commenting to Berg on the "debacle of modern music," adding that "Stravinsky . . . [has] gotten himself a Dutch-boy cut, and does Bach imitations." Here Schoenberg was referring to Stravinsky's influential neo-classical style,

10 Stein, page 80.

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which posed an enticing, easy-on-the-ear alternative to his own radical twelve-tone technique. At this point in time, with the camps clearly gathered for battle, Schoenberg could hardly afford to be generous.

The war and immediate postwar years were unfruitful ones for many European composers, and one wonders how much of that euphoric Festspiel spirit of the early Twenties—the desire to gather together to worship at the altar of new art—grew out of the hope that the recent stagnation and the aesthetic dilemmas of post-Wagnerian music could be alleviated in one major international direction if only the right inspirational atmosphere was provided.

In fact, this aesthetic crisis of confidence was too short-lived to be anything but peripheral to the experience of the ISCM. The two distinct international styles which had emerged by the late Twenties—the French-inspired neo-classicism represented by Stravinsky and the German twelve-tone serialism of Schoenberg—emerged independent of the organization. And the often violent conflicts and jealousies which later erupted within the ISCM during the interwar years could only reconfirm that among modernists no unifying aesthetic force, no utopian oneness, was at hand. Indeed, the stakes in aesthetic leadership were too high to permit more than a respectful acknowledgment of the accomplishments of the other side.

Interestingly, Schoenberg was the undoubted victor in the long-winded quarter of a century of competition which followed the polarization of German and French modernism. Stravinsky himself converted to twelve-tone composition in the 1950s, soon after Schoenberg's death. But it was a Pyrrhic victory. Stravinsky bestowed the blessings of his remarkable talents on a style of composition which although taken very seriously (even accorded a certain audience acceptance in such rare cases as Alban Berg's opera *Lulu*) was fast being supplanted by a new avant-garde. Schoenberg's laurels were simply the honor of having determined the style *against* which most post-World War II composers were reacting.

If anything was learned in the long and bitter marriage which followed the honeymoon of musical internationalism it was that an international style could not result from an international organization of composers. It would be perhaps proof enough to say that several of the more significant musical figures of the century, among them Stravinsky and Schoenberg, steered pretty much clear of the ISCM. But nowhere are the limits of such an organization so poignantly demonstrated as in the march of Egon Wellesz's career.

As a composer, Wellesz responded to the most eclectic and cosmopolitan of modernist inspirations, but the forms which his later compositions took reveal a profound debt to Viennese Classicism. His post-World War II production, which included nine symphonies, an opera, a violin concerto, and several chamber works, represented a revitalization of that Austrian symphonic tradition which had nearly expired with Mahler's death. Though most of his works were successfully premiered by major European orchestras and chamber ensembles, he seems to have been virtually ignored by the ISCM. At least there is not one listing of a performance of any of his works at an international ISCM festival after 1948 to be found in a recently published comprehensive history of the organization. And there seems also to have been no attempt to honor him on his death in 1974.

Whether Wellesz resented the failure of this organization to take proper notice of him in his gray eminence he never publicly indicated. But certainly his return to the inspirations of the Austrian classical style goes far to demonstrate that creative artistry has more to do with sound cultural tradition than with even the most high-minded of cooperative international ventures.

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Yves Bonnefoy
by Joseph Frank

The poetry and prose of Yves Bonnefoy (b. 1923) have always possessed for me, ever since I first became acquainted with them and their author more than thirty years ago, a very rare quality—a quality that can only be characterized in words that run the risk, especially in English, of sounding ponderous and grandiloquent. But there is no help for it, and there are some subjects (this is, I believe, one of them) for which a certain elevation of tone is amply justified and even obligatory.

What first struck me about the man, aside from a complete absence of any pose or pretension, was a quiet and tranquil spiritual integrity, a determination—never asserted, but simply felt directly as part of the personality—to go his own way and to follow his own path. The nature of this path gradually became clearer to me as I immersed myself in his work, and began to acquire a sense of the deep wellsprings of inspiration from which it sprang. For I realized that Bonnefoy was writing poetry originating in a metaphysical impulse of the highest order —a poetry which, for someone like myself, whose native language is English, inevitably recalled some of the most soaring flights of the Wordsworthian muse. I do not know if the comparison has been made by others in the now quite voluminous Bonnefoy literature, but his French has always seemed to me to have the same stripped simplicity and bareness as Wordsworth's English, creating an effect of sublimity by its very bleakness; his predominantly rural imagery has the same mysterious and infinitely expansive resonance; and he too conceives of poetry as communicating to the reader a sense of a higher order of being—those revelatory moments, those "spots of time" when, as Wordsworth wrote in "Tintern Abbey,"

> . . . with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things.

Bonnefoy, however, is a man of his time; and in comparing him with Wordsworth, or in stressing the predominantly metaphysical or even quasi-mystical aspect of his poetry, I do not wish to imply that he has sought for ways to escape the burdens and responsibilities of living in the turmoil of the present. Quite the contrary, he exposes himself to the withering breath of modern negativity with a full awareness of its overwhelming strength, a full realization of the collapse in modern times of any coherent system of values giving sense and meaning to human life. My own first encounter with Bonnefoy took place in the early 1950s, in a Paris which, along with the rest of Europe and the entire world, was just beginning to emerge from the catastrophes and horrors of the

This essay will be included as the preface to a volume of Bonnefoy's essays, to be published by the University of Chicago Press at the end of this year.

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Second World War. Existentialism, whatever else one may say about it, attempted to find ways of responding to these horrors in its literary creations; and Bonnefoy's preoccupation with the themes of death and destruction, though rooted in more independent personal sources than mere adherence to a philosophical movement, fit in very well with this mood of the moment. He was in any case quite familiar with the work of such thinkers as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Léon Chestov (I use the French spelling), the last a Russian emigré essayist whose impact on Bonnefoy can hardly be overestimated (he has referred to it himself quite frequently) and whose ideas take their origin in an impassioned meditation on the great Russian novelists, particularly Dostoevsky.

The poetry of Yves Bonnefoy may thus be described as an anguished dialogue with death, a dialogue which throws into the balance against extinction and negation all the forces of the earth, and the occasional gleams of transcendence—what he calls "présence"—which occur in those blessed moments when he perceives "tout dans la continuité et la suffisance d'un *lieu,* et dans la transparence de *l'unité*" ("everything in the continuity and sufficiency of a *place,* and in the transparence of *unity*"). These primordial opposites are constantly played off against each other; and the poetry explores, with an indefatigable and inexhaustible tenderness, all the harrowing uncertainties of the human condition in its oscillation between hope and despair. A passage that particularly moved me, and where much of what is central to Bonnefoy is admirably expressed, is the tribute he offered to the memory of his old friend Boris de Schloezer, another Russian emigré of great importance for him, and a man, as he has told me, of a pure and abiding religious faith. Schloezer was of course well known as the influential music critic of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in its great period between the two wars, and also as a man of letters—a novelist, literary critic, and translator from the Russian. In Bonnefoy's lines, the faith of Schloezer is rewarded by an unearthly music played for him alone:

Et Boris de Schloezer, quand il est mort
Entendant sur l'appontement une musique
Dont ses proches ne savaient rien (était-elle,
déjà,
La flûte de la déliverance révélée
Ou un ultime bien de la terre perdue,
"Oeuvre" transfigurée)—derrière soi
N'a laisse que ces eaux brûlées d'enigme.[1]

For Bonnefoy, whose work shows no traces of any belief in "la deliverance révélée," such music could only be "un ultime bien de la terre perdue"; it is the music arising from a harmony suddenly felt *within* life and human experience, an "oeuvre transfigurée" whose earthly provenance does not prevent it from communicating the same sense of deliverance. In his enchanting spiritual autobiography, part memoir and part reverie, *L'Arrière-pays,* Yves Bonnefoy has described his obsession with the idea that somewhere in the *arrière-pays*—the back country, away from the beaten paths and off the well-trodden roads—there exists a Great Good Place that is the physical and terrestrial embodiment of such an epiphanic plentitude of being. But this obsession is also a temptation—a Gnostic temptation, as Bonnefoy calls it in his own appropriation of the term. Just as the Gnostics believed that their doctrines marked out the way to salvation and enabled the soul to escape from death and hence from time, so the same ambition, he suggests, inspires this quest for a perfection that could be *entirely* realized within the boundaries of human life. To long for such perfection means to long to escape, like the Gnostics, from the hazards and uncertainties of human finitude.

In *L'Arrière-pays* (which cries out for translation), Bonnefoy depicts, with a bemused and half-melancholy humor, some of the moments when he felt he had reached

1 "And Boris de Schloezer, when he died/hearing on the gangplank a music/inaudible to those nearest him (was it already/the piping of revealed deliverance/or a final boon of the lost earth,/a "work" transfigured)—left behind him/only these burnt waters of enigma."

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his goal—whether in art, literature, travel, or simply through the verbal magic exercised by exotic place-names. Surely *there* it would be found! Somehow he could never surrender this belief, not so much in the Incarnation as in the final fulfillment of the Messianic promise concentrated, by some miraculous dispensation, in one small plot of earth. But Bonnefoy also evokes, in words of haunting beauty, how each time he approaches what seems to be the accomplishment of the claim to such fulfillment, he is seized by an emotion of both exaltation and disquiet. "Partout où l'on a voulu un surcroît de mur, orner une façade, surélever des terrasses, y paraître, faire entendre au soleil levant, ou couchant, une musique de la dissolution du moi illusoire mais sur des assises de roc, et dans l'architecture qui est la pérmanence vecue; en tous ces lieux affirmés, oui, je me sens chez moi à l'instant même ou j'aspire à l'insitué qui les nie."[2] For he is always uneasily aware, once having reached a spot at which mankind has wished to affirm its triumph, that there is in reality no such privileged place; there is no art or architecture, however imperious its claim to "la pérmanence vecue," that can guarantee eternity to such an aspiration. The search for transcendence must continue forever, guided only by one unassailable certainty—that its elusive "présence" can flash forth at any moment from the simplest and humblest object or artifact as well as from the greatest creations of the human imagination. Or to put the same idea in the words of another great philosophical poet, Wallace Stevens, who also writes out of the metaphysical solitude of modern man, and whose work, despite a sharp dissonance of stylistic register, contains unexpected thematic affinities with Bonnefoy:

> If ever the search for a tranquil belief should end,
> The future might stop emerging out of the past,
> Out of what is full of us; yet the search
> And the future emerging out of us seem to be one.

These, then, are some of the dominating themes and preoccupations of Bonnefoy's poetry, and they infuse his critical essays as well. His criticism is that of a poet, not in the sense of being eccentric or idiosyncratic, or concerned with the quarrels of literary coteries and the jockeying for position amid the rapid changes of literary fashion, but in the sense of which the same could be said of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry. Their criticism also came out of the same vision of life and was infused with the same values as those expressed in their poetry; and Bonnefoy's criticism should be seen as a worthy successor of the line begun by Baudelaire's *Curiosités Esthétiques* and continued in Mallarmé's *Divagations* and Valéry's *Variétés.* Such criticism is not primarily that of scholars and teachers (though Bonnefoy's scholarship has never been faulted, and he has taught for many years, most recently to packed amphitheaters in the Collège de France) but of creators who are actively engaged in the literary process, and who, if they concern themselves with the past at all, do so in their own terms and in the light of their own problems. Such criticism instinctively accomplishes that "fusion of horizons" that has recently become a rallying cry for a whole group of literary theoreticians; like Monsieur Jourdain, knowing nothing about rhetoric but speaking in "prose" all the same, poet-critics have always been exemplary hermeneuticians unbeknownst to themselves. I cannot help wondering, however, whether the sovereign self-certitude of such great creators should really be recommended to every fledgling student of literature as an example to follow.

The virtues of this type of criticism derive from its vital relation to the experience of creation, and from the richness of mind, the

2 "Wherever one wanted to buttress a wall, to adorn a façade, to raise the height of terraces, to be manifest, and sound at sunrise or sunset a music of the illusory self's dissolution, but on a bedrock foundation and in architecture which is lived permanence; yes, in all these places, I feel at home the very instant I aspire to the unsituated which denies them."

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profundity of insight, the wisdom and sensitivity that its authors bring to bear on the subjects that come under their scrutiny. It is not my purpose to illustrate in any detail how brilliantly Bonnefoy lights up the literature of both past and present, and how the illumination afforded by his perceptions and categories, the suppleness and imaginative ingenuity with which he employs them, lead to surprising and unexpected but totally persuasive interpretations of long-familiar figures and their historical epochs. I leave to the readers the pleasure of discovering these treasures for themselves in essays that range from the *Song of Roland* through Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Valéry. There is, however, one essay—Bonnefoy's inaugural address on assuming his chair at the Collège de France—which is of such outstanding importance in the present state of literary criticism that I should like to dwell on it a little further.

Bonnefoy is not given to literary-critical polemics; for the most part he contents himself with setting down his own ideas and letting them speak for themselves, without feeling any need to quarrel with others about *theirs*. But, naturally, he is fully cognizant of the contemporary critical scene, and well aware of the extent to which the status and stature of literature have been undermined by recent theories. If we accept such theories, the work of literature itself, as well as the consciousness of the creator in whom it originated, both crumble into nothingness "in the ruins of the cogito"; what is left are only "thousands of levels of the fleeting clouds of this language of which, for our passing moment, we are only a slight ruffling of the structures." And he knows perfectly well that his own insistence on asserting the reality, even if elusive and transitory, of those blessed moments of "présence" runs smack against the fierce campaign waged by Jacques Derrida, with all the untiring remorselessness of Captain Ahab hunting down the Great White Whale, to uncover and expunge all the lingering traces of the "metaphysics of presence" anywhere and everywhere it can be detected, whether in philosophy or literature.

Yves Bonnefoy thus felt called upon, in the solemn and celebratory moment at which he officially acceded to the chair of Roland Barthes in 1981, to enunciate and defend his own position; but it is typical of the man that he does not do so simply by rejecting what he opposes. For who, after all, if not the poets were aware of "what criticism has stressed recently concerning the role of the signifier in writing and concerning the part played by the unconscious in their decisions; . . . on the threshold of our modernity, which began as a breakdown of the Romantics' absolute idea of the self, they had already made this role their primary preoccupation. Rimbaud was not unaware of the autonomy of the signifier when he was writing his sonnet 'Voyelles,' nor was Mallarmé when he put together his 'Sonnet en yx.'" Indeed, so far as the most powerful thrust of the deconstructive attack on literature is the denunciation of its claims to any sort of truth-value, Bonnefoy even radicalizes its underlying animus. For he argues that recent criticism, remaining on the level of language and the signifier, has not gone far enough and really fails to expose the *true* source of illusion in literary creation.

As a poet, he knows that this unquenchable source, "a desire as old as earliest infancy," is the Gnostic temptation to create a world alternative to our own, and to revel in it according to our heart's desire. Literature destroys the world through language in order to fashion a self-enclosed universe that claims its own autonomous reality; its personal idiolect, which simply excludes what it finds incongruous, is "a semblance of the golden age." He vigorously denounces what he calls the false cult of the Image, which he defines as "this impression of a reality at last fully incarnate," though "it comes to us, paradoxically, through words which have turned away from incarnation." "The Image," he declares, "is certainly a lie, however sincere the maker of the image"; and he agrees that "it really was time for textual criticism to come along and analyze and even to

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undermine the ever-truncated perspectives which pile up in the literary use of speech." More deeply, he is hostile on principle to all attempts, whether through the arts or in philosophy, to construct an order presumably immune to the existential fragilities of the human condition.

So far as recent thought has worked to destroy all such attempts, Yves Bonnefoy welcomes its salutary labors, which coincide so closely with so many of his own idea-feelings (to use a Dostoevskian coinage). But, in the midst of the ruins of all past certainties, life must still continue; and it is out of this realization that he begins to assert his own values, tentatively but firmly, against the consequences of such limitless sapping of the foundations. Do we not, after all, "when we speak . . . say 'I,' and do we not say it in the urgency of our days and in the midst of a condition and a place which remain, whatever may be their false pretenses and their groundlessness, both a reality and an absolute?" Moreover, "if the deconstruction of the old ontological ambitions seems, on a certain level, an imperative of consciousness, their weakening, in any case in concrete situations, is accompanied by a risk of decomposition and death." Yves Bonnefoy thus reaffirms the moral and social needs of human existence and human community against the epistemological iconoclasms of the reigning doctrines, and he sees the task of poetry precisely as the continual rememoration of such needs, the refusal to allow them to be forgotten.

"If being is nothing other than the will that there be being, poetry is nothing itself, in the estrangement of language, but this will understanding its own nature—or at the very least, in dark times, keeping the memory of itself." The term "being" here has primarily a social meaning; it designates the values that knit a community together just as "présence" suddenly unites the accidental dispersal of nature; and Bonnefoy illustrates its significance in a poignant passage where he imagines a handful of people, the survivors of some disaster, painfully struggling to re-establish their lives. In so doing they make the decision, without even thinking about it, ". . . that *there is being*: these people have no doubt, beneath the collapsing rock, that one's relationship to oneself, even if nothing founds it, is origin and suffices to itself." They learn (or relearn) "that *what is* is what responds to [their] project, what allows for exchange, and must first of all have done this to find a place in language: for instance, the main features of the place, the tools of labor, later perhaps the materials of a first moment of rejoicing—one will say then the bread and the wine . . . . Words which name a sacred order, words which welcome us on earth!"

It is such words, Yves Bonnefoy believes, that it is the task of poetry to pronounce and continually to revivify. "Whatever may be the draftings of the sign, the obvious of nothingness, to say 'I' remains for them [the poets] the best of reality and a precise task, the task of reorienting words, once beyond the confines of the dream, on our relationship to others, which is the origin of being." So while the poet will go hand in hand with the semiologists and the deconstructive philosophers for a good stretch of the road, he parts company with them when it comes to an ultimate vision of what is basic and fundamental to human existence. It is not, as we see, on the level of the concept as such that Yves Bonnefoy defends his point of view, and I believe he is profoundly right in having refused to do so; finally it is out of one's deepest sense of the foundations of human life that one chooses for or against *any* metaphysics.

This inaugural lecture, so finely comprehensive and so gravely discriminating, will, I am certain, eventually come to be seen as one of the major documents of twentieth-century criticism, and may well already be on the way to attaining this position. The growing international reputation of both Bonnefoy's poetry and criticism, obtained entirely on the basis of a first-hand acquaintance with his work (he has never made a public statement about anything but his poetry, and shirked any kind of personal self-display), may well be seen as a sign of the

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times, and an indication that the values he has always expressed with such moving and tragic serenity (if I am allowed this expression) have now come to respond to a long-felt need of the contemporary sensibility. This is how I would see it, at any rate, and I can only hope that my conjecture will turn out to be accurate. Even if it should prove fanciful, I can only rejoice at the existence of such a voice sounding amidst the modern cacophony, when so much of what is considered culturally exemplary is all too often inspired by a hysterical rage for violation and desecration.

Yves Bonnefoy is a devoted admirer of the late great Greek poet George Seferis, and I should like, in conclusion, to quote some lines from his reverent portrait of the man. Seferis served as Greek Ambassador to Great Britain, and Bonnefoy recalls a visit to him in London when he was greatly worried by his official duties. Nonetheless, Bonnefoy found Seferis "si gravement tendu, si obstinément attaché à une pensée unique en dépit des soucis du jour qui se marquaient encore sur son visage, c'était pour moi en effet—je le dis sans désir de magnifier, mais pour definir une âme, par le jeu des analogies qui nous unissent aux choses—une exigence si pure, un son si juste dans le discord d'aujourd'hui, qu'il fallait bien que l'astre de l'être, tout enfoui qu'll pût être au-dessous de nos horizons, n'eût pas cesse d'exister. Un grand poète est un homme suffisant."[3] I cite these words because they seem to me to apply so perfectly to Yves Bonnefoy himself.

3 ". . . so gravely tense, so obstinately attached to a single thought despite the daily cares that still lined his face, it was for me—I say this without any wish to magnify but rather to define a soul through the play of analogies which unite us to things—a demand so pure, a note so just in today's discord as to prove that the star of being, though it may have fallen beneath our horizons, had not ceased to exist. A great poet is a man who suffices."

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"Cider 5¢ a glass"
by Donald Hall

"When I heard Monica's
voice on the telephone, I
knew what had happened. She
spoke almost coldly, holding
the tears or hysterics back.
Sam had pecked her goodbye
in bed that morning the way
he usually did;
when she got up, she assumed
he'd left for the office
on schedule until she
looked out and saw the Buick
parked in the carport. Sam sat
upright in the driver's
seat with his eyes open.
Because I am sixty, I have
lost many friends (my mother
who lived to be eighty-
seven looked at newspapers
in her last years only
to read the obituaries)
but Sam and I met
at boarding school, we roomed
together all through college,
and we were best man at each
other's weddings. We met
when we were new at Holderness,
homesick and lonesome

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as we watched the returning
boys greeting each other
after their summers on the Cape.
We took walks, we talked . . .
Our friendship endured college,
political quarrels,
one drunken fistfight, dating
each other's ex-girlfriends,
hitchhiking, graduation,
and marriage; and survived
although Sam left the East
to settle in Chicago
and drudge for a conglomerate's
legal department,
pleading in court to deny
workmen's compensation.
I work for the Boston *Globe,*
considered liberal,
and whenever we met Sam
started right in on me
for the naivete
of my politics. Sometimes
we argued all night long . . .
but I learned: If I refused
to fight, one night at the end
of our visit, after
our wives had gone to bed,
as we drank one more Bourbon
together, Sammy
would admit that he hated what
he did—work, boss, and company.
He wanted to quit;
and he *would,* too, as soon
as he found another job.
One night he wept
as he told a confusing story
about a man in Florida,
paralyzed for life
when a fork-lift crushed
his spinal cord, who was accused
of being drunk on the job,
which he wasn't. When Sam's

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department won its case
Sam got a bonus. Of course
he never quit his job
and his salary to work
for Cesar Chavez or sail
his boat around the world.
He spent ten years planning
early retirement and died
six weeks before retiring.
Sam was a good father
and loyal husband most
of the time. In private life
he was affectionate
and loyal. Many people
virtuous in public
privately abuse their wives
and children. Then I think:
'What about the night-watchman,
paralyzed and cheated?
What about *his* family?',
Then I stop thinking.
Sam wrote letters rarely. We met
every couple of years, here
or there, and he called up
impulsively. Last August
Sam and Monica drove
to our place. He looked good
although he wheezed a little.
He referred to someone
by name, as if I should know
about her, and shook his head
sharply, two or three times,
insisting: 'It was only
an infatuation.'
One night after dinner,
neither of us drinking much
these days, he took his guitar
from the trunk of the car
so that we could sing old
songs and reminisce. On Labor
Day they headed back.
After Monica's call I dreamed

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about Sam all night. Today
I am ten-thousand times
more alive in the rearward
vision of memory
than I am editing stories
by recent college
graduates or typing
'graphs on my green terminal.
I lean back, closing my eyes,
and my sore mind repeats
home-movies of one day:
It's October, a Sunday
in nineteen-forty-four,
Indian summer bright with
New Hampshire leaves: Sammy
and I walk (happy in our
new friendship, sixteen and
seventeen years old) under
tall sugarmaples
extravagantly Chinese red,
and russet elms still thriving,
enormous and noble
in the blue air.
We talk about the war going on
overseas and whether we
will fight in it; we talk
about what we will do
after the war and college.
I admit: I want to write novels.
Sam thinks maybe
he might be a musician—
he plays guitar and sings
Josh White songs—'but maybe
it would be better to do
something to *help* people . . .'
Maybe he should think about
Law School? (I understand:
He feels that his rich father
leads a fatuous life
with his Scotch and his girlfriends.)
Although we talk excitedly,
although we mean what

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we say and listen closely
        to each other, the real
burden of our talk
        is the affection that contains
and exalts us. As it turns dark,
        we head back toward school
on a shadowy gravel road;
        we are astonished
to see ahead (on a lane
        without cars in nineteen-
forty-four, as if an apparition
        conjured there
to conclude this day that fixed
        our friendship forever)
a small table with a pitcher
        on it, three glasses,
and a sign: CIDER 5¢
        A GLASS. A screendoor swings
open on the gray unpainted
        porch of a farmhouse,
and a woman (old, fat,
        and strong) walks down the dirt path
to pour us our cider.
        She takes our nickels and sells
us a second glass and then
        gives us a third. All day
today I keep tasting
        that Sunday's almost painful
detonation of cider sweet
        and harsh in my mouth."

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Art

The Rosso exhibition, or, difficulty partly overcome

by Creighton Gilbert

For buffs of Old Master shows, the first startling thing about the Rosso show at the National Gallery in Washington is that it was possible to have it.[1] Rosso was a brilliant and unusual painter of the era of Michelangelo, working at first in Florence and Rome, later in France, in the early sixteenth century. For artists of that era, full-scale one-man shows, with loans from museums of many different countries, seem virtually to have ceased. It has been thirty years since we saw the last one devoted to either of the artists commonly linked with Rosso as the creators of Mannerism: Pontormo and Parmigianino. No barrier of this kind seems to apply against the seventeenth century, however, as the Caravaggio and Zurbarán exhibitions have recently illustrated. There appears to be a line drawn somewhere around 1600; to reach earlier seems to breach a feeling about rarity or fragility of objects, if only when it involves a lot by one artist, a feeling which does not reach a disturbing level for works after that date, or for just a few Donatellos or other great earlier objects.

To be sure, there is an argument that the Rosso exhibition is really not so exceptional, because its main focus is on drawings and prints. There is continued acceptance for that kind of limited loan show of a sixteenth-century master, most obviously in the case of Raphael, the artist of that age probably most exalted through an emphasis on his great drawings. Hence a Rosso show of "drawings, prints and decorative arts" could get loan permissions under current museum policy. In Rosso's case, however, such a limitation can still offer an effective one-man show—as it could not with Raphael, or perhaps with anyone else—because paintings have a uniquely depressed role in Rosso's whole oeuvre, and paper media have a primary one. Eugene Carroll, the leading expert on the artist and organizer of the show at the National Gallery, records about twenty-five paintings by Rosso from a career of more than twenty-five years, including juvenilia and a badly damaged late fresco cycle. But "the number of inventions known from his drawings and from the fine prints made from them and other lost drawings is greater . . . . It was as an inventor in drawing, and not only or always as the executor of his inventions" that he gained fame.

We have lost most of Rosso's work from his last ten years when he was the hugely successful decorator for the King of France, but much of his early painting survives, even if there never was much of it. Of only two fresco commissions (the best sort of job) that he got before he went to France, one was unfinished after an argument with another artist, and the other was threatened

1 "Rosso Fiorentino: Drawings, Prints and Decorative Arts" was on display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. from October 25 to January 3. A catalogue with the same name has been published by the National Gallery (389 pages, $29.95).

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with being covered up by another fresco on the same theme by the more established Andrea del Sarto. (That fresco was Rosso's earliest ambitious work, at twenty; the date is quietly established in this catalogue, and is several years earlier than had been thought by Carroll and all others.) He had to seek work in small provincial towns, where his two most monumental works other than frescoes are still found; one, the Descent from the Cross in Volterra, now famous in color reproductions, is among the great icons of the twentieth-century fascination with Mannerism, for those who read Mannerism as an art of anti-realistic distortion and expressionistic stress. A small altarpiece done for Florence was rejected, and according to research published too late for the catalogue, was consigned to a small village church where it remained without notice for three hundred years.

It might seem easy to label Rosso an instance of an avant-garde rebel-genius scorned in his time. That syndrome, quite real in the Romantic period, has been too eagerly extrapolated as an eternal pattern to support ideas about the inadequacy of all social systems. The case most often mentioned, of Rembrandt, has turned out on checking to be dubious, and Rosso's spectacular success from age thirty-six as the King of France's head artist, innovator at Fontainebleau of an immensely influential new fashion, goes far to make his case dubious as well. It is a rule generally valid for the Renaissance that posterity has confirmed the judgments made by contemporaries about each generation of artists who then emerged. The real rejection met by Rosso in his early years is all the more fascinating for being outside the pattern. It still remains to be explained, but the show tells us much about how he coped with it, and that proves to be of great interest, too.

It was in his years in Rome, from thirty to thirty-three, that Rosso made a living and secured fame chiefly with his drawings. He collaborated with a young printmaker who was just starting out; they were sponsored by a middleman who had performed a similar role with Raphael and his engraver up to the time of Raphael's death a few years before. What Rosso did has, however, no precise parallel. His friend Parmigianino, close in age and stylistic approach and also then in Rome, made some etchings; and Raphael had provided his engraver with many drawings. But it seems likely that only in a few cases did Raphael intend his drawings for the engraver when he did them; and the idea of using drawings that Raphael was not going to use for his paintings (his purpose when he drew them) may have come from the engraver himself. Rosso's procedure, making the prints his central vehicle, finds its analogue only in Dürer and other great printmakers of northern Europe, who of course were well known. (The minimal attention to this connection is regrettable in the catalogue, which has the usual strongly monographic orientation.) But the northerners did their own engraving, leaving Rosso unique in making the drawings his only personal contribution.

The exhibition beautifully brings out the situation, in a way that no book could do. It shows all the engravings done in Rome under these arrangements (as well as the other prints derived from Rosso earlier and later) in brilliant impressions. One of the chief, but usually unsung, chores of arranging such an exhibition is to travel to all the leading public print collections and choose the finest pull of each print, mainly by relying on experienced eyes. The care given in this case is quietly shown, for example, in a set of six prints of stories of Hercules, which come from four different museums. The print is hung, when possible, next to Rosso's drawing. Of course only a few of these drawings survive, and not all of them were lent—the show offers not quite half of all the artist's drawings known today. Despite this, the deductions are there for us to make. The engraver made virtually no modifications, unlike the engraver after Raphael. This may well reflect a different kind of personal as well as professional or business relationship. On the other hand, it

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would be further from the truth here than in the case of the prints after Raphael to speak of "reproductive engraving." The drawings of Rosso are not so much originals being copied as intermediate stages toward the intended final effect, like copper plates or photographic negatives. Most obviously, the prints are not reversed left-to-right from the drawings, as copies normally are; they are realizations of the drawn image, not second-level records of it. Later, in France, reproductive engravings were indeed made from Rosso's work, including his paintings, by a number of printmakers. They too are seen here, and the drop in quality is striking, in my view. I cannot share Mr. Carroll's enthusiasm, especially in the case of Antonio Fantuzzi.

The sense that this is a full one-man show has another, secondary support, in the inclusion of a number of works in other media, ones that involve color. Most of them are majolica plates and enamel plaques. These are in no sense by Rosso, but copies by various craftsmen from the engravings. Since the engravings are all shown, these works add nothing to our understanding of the art of Rosso, apart from giving material evidence that he was admired. It is not at all clear why they were included; in the case of the works in fragile majolica, they at once raise the issue of the wisdom of shipping ancient objects about, especially when no compensating benefit is obvious. It hardly seems enough that they offer spots of color in the space. It is very different, though, with the two largest exhibits, twenty-foot-wide tapestries from Vienna. They are contemporary copies not from prints but from Rosso's paintings for the royal palace at Fontainebleau. Better preserved than the originals, and in their actual size, these do have great authority in extending our knowledge of the artist at the opposite pole from the drawings, in his most monumental and his most colorful aspect. In view of this splendid extension, it is the stranger that we are not shown the painting by Rosso which is permanently owned by the National Gallery in Washington itself. Instead, a label in the

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exhibition points out that one can go upstairs and see it in its regular location. In this case it is hard to think of a reason why it was not "loaned," and since none is given we are being authorized to make our own guess. Since the same thing happens in other cases (for instance, at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in the recent Giovanni Pisano exhibition[2]), the most obvious guess would be, alas, that it is a matter of the inertial power of departmental bureaucracy, which does indeed loom large in the museum corporate culture. The diminishing result is that an exhibition so well thought out to help us understand a marvelous painter better shows works in five media but not in painting.

The other startling thing about the exhibition, the more significant one, is the specific report it gives us about Rosso's art, especially in modifying the standard tag about him as a pioneer Mannerist. People who might be drawn by general awareness of him along these lines—say, from a picture of the Volterra Descent in a college textbook—will find here very little pre-expressionistic distortion. Nor will they find very much that matches a more recent, revisionist, definition of Mannerism as "the stylish style," as self-aware ornamental reworking of great models from the previous generation of artists. The lack of evidence in Rosso for this view of Mannerism is probably less strange, in that the revisionist proposals depended to a large extent on transferring the focus of Mannerism to a different group of artists.

Other things are found instead. In several of the artist's earlier drawings one finds life drawing of a basic kind in beautiful renderings. Single nudes, male and female models, are alive in light, posing at midpoints in the range of gestures from slight to emphatic, proportioned to the sheets of paper. Chalk and pen use all kinds of line for shading, contour, and detail in fluid harmonious interlocking formulations, producing stable assurance in the figures. These are classics of Renaissance vision, of the sort commonly and not unreasonably thought of as reflections of humanism. They are also variants on Raphael's drawings, which could themselves be seen in a marvelous recent exhibition at the Morgan Library of work by Raphael and his pupils in the same medium.[3] Indeed, an independent artist like Rosso complements Raphael more impressively than any of Raphael's assistants did. Raphael's instructive mastery of the human being fluidly moving—friction-free in smooth actualization without being slick, always convincing us of the real experience—was understood by Rosso, and Raphael would certainly have respected him.

There is a very different Rosso in the two earliest prints, which got him started in that medium by their shocking success. At first one might want to account for the difference simply by the functional shift to works involving a narrative drama. The earlier of the two, from a very ambitious drawing he did at twenty-three, shows skeletons in vigorous debate, the topic being another one lying on the ground among them. The second is of a fierce, emaciated nude plunging toward us through a tangle of thorny branches and fantastic animals. Both prints have a firm base in life drawing, but exploit it for a darker point, both emotionally and visually. Not even the earliest writers claimed to understand their meaning, and recent efforts are rightly doubted by the cataloguer. Carroll also rightly says that there is nothing like them in Rosso's time and place, but in stopping there he perhaps evinces again the common limitation in specialists, the narrowness of the monograph writer. Aside

2 "Giovanni Pisano in Genoa" was on view at the Metropolitan Museum in New York from October 30 through December 6.

3 "Raphael and his Circle" was on display at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York from October 9 through January 3. The catalogue, entitled *Drawings by Raphael and his Circle: From British and North American Collections,* was written by J.A. Gere, former keeper of prints and drawings at the British Museum (284 pages, $24.95 in paper).

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from one slight allusion, no exploration is given of a link from these images to the great printmaking tradition of northern Europe. We might recall the dancing skeletons in a famous Nürnberg woodcut of 1493, or the Schongauer engraving of the Temptation of St. Anthony, with the saint clawed at by similar dark beasts. The boy Michelangelo copied that engraving, reminding us of the uniquely international range of this art. The difference from Rosso's other works might derive from a tendency of print culture to go its own way. Closer to his own time are the skeletons and nightmares of Baldung Grien. The introduction to a recent catalogue of that artist's prints and drawings quoted a definition by the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, the most famous definer of such things, of the difference at that time between German and Italian art.[4] The Germans, he wrote, preferred the unexpected and intuitive, the tense and entangled, the willful and subjective, the crowded and agitated, over Italian lucidity, proportion, and substance. Every term added to the others gives us more reasons to call these Rosso engravings "German," and they do powerfully call into question north-south polarities of this sort, now again much favored. But of course he is not German, for direct side-by-side comparisons would show both his different individual personality and the basis of his work in those lucid, substantial life drawings.

The big sets of prints done in Rome evoke still another Rosso, especially in the scenes of classical gods at work and in love. This is his comedy, seen in observant cows and other animal props, or in the human expressions poised between miming and wearing masks, as of actors milking our applause. That tone certainly is inspired by the texts that are behind the stories, mainly Ovid. Ovid's urbane modern-city-man's jokes about the primitive fertility gods, attracted to their intricate erotic innovations while disengaged from their solemn power, are Rosso's reference, and he plays up the literary context with a fullness rarely matched by the hosts of other artists who mined the same tales.

Still other phases of Rosso really do exemplify both definitions of Mannerism, but the expressionist kind is found chiefly in the large paintings absent here, and the ornamental kind in the work for the French court. Altogether he really is "protean," involved briefly at many stopping points of a journey. He is the kind of artist critics today like to call "problematic," in the sense that he resists the defining formulas of critics.

His biography was as ambiguous. While his career troubles were evidently connected with fights he had with other artists, more even than with patrons, we are told what a nice person he was by the first biographer, Vasari, who as a fairly pushy seventeen-year-old had met the master, working just then in Vasari's hometown. Then, at the peak of his success, at forty-six, Rosso committed suicide. The unifying core of Rosso sometimes seems not reducible to anything much more precise than a truism about the artist's attention to the human being and to the fateful concerns among which it lives. The exhibition does its job by offering us more about all his stages of involvement than we could easily see before, and ought to provide the impulse to clearer answers.

4 The catalogue accompanied an exhibition entitled "Hans Baldung Grien, Prints and Drawings," which was shown in 1981 at the National Gallery of Art and at the Yale University Art Gallery. The catalogue with the same title, published by the University of Chicago Press, has an introduction by Alan Shestack.

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From September to December

by Jed Perl

The world is full of people impelled by wealth to buy, *but the grossness of whose taste prevents them from* appreciating. *These people are the prey of charlatans. The successes which these charlatans achieve choke the reputation of the talented painter. Fortunate indeed is that man of talent if he do not become envious and resentful! One should make up one's mind to work either for the* gross *public or for* the happy few. *One cannot please both at the same time.*
—Stendhal, *A Roman Journal,* 1829

Trends. The Mary Boone Gallery arrived in SoHo a decade ago, along with Neo-Expressionism and a new bullish art market. Boone's artists, especially the two who would become most famous, Julian Schnabel and David Salle, had no inhibitions—about size, about subject matter, or about taking up a Macho Man pose that had gone out of fashion in the egalitarian atmosphere of the Sixties and Seventies. As a matter of fact, Mary Boone seemed to be almost proud that she didn't show any women artists; she obviously enjoyed bringing back, single-handedly, the image of the artist as a bad boy who'd been given permission to be bad forever. Schnabel, her baddest boy, resented media claims that he was Boone's creation, and left a few years ago for the Pace Gallery, where his work has become either lazier or more subdued—one can't ever be quite sure. A new rabble-rousing recruit, Eric Fischl, was brought in; but the temperature at Boone has definitely dropped in recent years.

AIDS, and perhaps a sense, even before Black Monday, that bull would turn to bear, has made Boone's boys-will-be-boys act a little stale. Salle, after beginning as the smartest smart-ass of the decade, is now cultivating cultural credentials, making sure that his first encounter with a Balanchine ballet is noted in catalogue chronologies, and confiding to an interviewer that his bedtime reading is Edmund Wilson's *The Fifties.* Boone has moved with the times, showing cooler, abstract art. If this is a gallery where one could always count on some male artist to kick up a rumpus, now that the moment has come for seriousness and sobriety the women have suddenly appeared—Barbara Kruger and Sherrie Levine, with their anti-commercial message art. For Boone, who trades in gender clichés, Woman is Prophetess. Kruger and Levine are the Guardians of the Mysteries. And the mysteries nowadays have much more to do with technological society than with the natural world. Boone, with Schnabel and Salle in tow, sponsored the rebirth of the original. She has now had the show-biz acumen to turn expectations inside out by sponsoring Sherrie Levine, one of the artists who popularized the death of the original as an art-world idea. Sherrie Levine's debut show at Boone —it opened the season in September—was an event which left the art world in a mixed-nuts mood.

Sherrie Levine's work is faceless, impersonal; but what many of us see as a lack

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points to Levine's essential idea. Levine's images aren't meant to have an aura; they're meant to tell us that there's no such thing as an original work of art anymore, that we live in a world of replicas and clones and shades. That's a position, no doubt about it, but if you're seeing Levine's work in a gallery, how are you supposed to respond? All one could do at Mary Boone in September was stroll through Levine's show, a spectator at the ultimate media event of the moment, and then perhaps stop to talk to a friend. In the back room were a group of Levine's re-photographings of photographic reproductions —in this case black-and-white photographs of black-and-white reproductions of Russian Constructivist photographs by Rodchenko. In the two front rooms were Levine's recent small-sized abstract paintings: plywood rectangles on which the plugs that lumberyards put in place of the knots had been painted in gold; compositions of vertical stripes; checkerboards; others resembling backgammon boards. Some of the paintings were done on wood; some were on sheets of lead mounted on wood (lead is, God knows why, the material of the moment). In the recent work Levine is appropriating indirectly. She isn't making exact replicas of modern masters, as she did in her photographs and watercolors; she's taking the "look" of a recognized high-modern style as the starting point for a series of variants. Levine does variants on Gene Davis, much as Warhol did variants on Campbell's Soup cans. (Keep the basic image, change the size, change the colors.) What mild stuff these are, Levine's comments on post-Fifties hard-edge stripe painting. Levine paints in an even, pleasant manner, with pretty pastel-ish colors and tasteful, slightly rumpled surfaces. She's the friendly appropriator; the work looks almost cute.

The crowds that were having their first close encounter with Sherrie Levine at Mary Boone in September must have felt bemused, unsure of why they'd been urged to come to SoHo in the first place to look at such small, undistinguished paintings. Only Levine's supporters knew exactly what the artist had risked by going into Mary Boone's pressure-cooker atmosphere, where all Levine's little ideological grace notes would count not at all. Since her early shows at Baskerville & Watson's closet-sized uptown gallery, Levine has expected gallery-goers to pay close attention to every shading of literary or political or aesthetic irony. To hardcore Levinites it matters that Levine's watercolors are done after art-book reproductions of Légers, not after the original Légers. At Baskerville & Watson the audience was hip to exactly what was being appropriated—they knew the difference between Stuart Davis and Léger, they understood that Davis is, intentionally, a bit "low," that Léger, a first-generation Cubist, is altogether "high." But what did the crowd at Boone know or care about any of the details? Donald Barthelme's catalogue essay made a brave attempt to keep the sugar-spun labyrinth of Levine's political analysis alive; but at Boone, Levine was being forced to stand or fall as a painter, and fall she did.

The Levine show caused chagrin among some of the artist's old supporters, who didn't know what to make of this icon of anti-establishment art going with a gallery that had possibly been anti-feminist and was certainly pro-commercial success. The catalogue—with a pink cover, the artist photographed in Hollywood-star sunglasses, and the paintings illustrated in upscale downtown *Metropolitan Life*-style lofts—only added to the feeling that Levine was now a sell-out, and proud of it. Some argued that Levine deserved success as much as anybody, but never before has the *October* magazine crowd been so cruelly confronted with the hard fact that to the American art market the leftist critique of the market is as easy to swallow as an after-dinner mint. Some left-wing critics were really demoralized, and I sympathize with their discomfort, just as I sympathize with the discomfort of those (often on the Right) who believe government funding is bad for the arts but now begin to wonder if the private money people know any better. Where do we turn? When art confronts power on power's terms

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power always seems to win. And even if the art were better it would by no means necessarily be more effective as a critique of commercial culture—or as a celebration of it.

Empirical experience shows that a gallery such as Boone—which was always obsessed with the market and is now, in Kruger and Levine, obsessed with the critique of the market—isn't a place where vital art appears. (Barbara Kruger, in a *Vanity Fair* article about the scene, praised Mary Boone's gallery as a "charged site"—*October*-speak if ever there was such a thing.) Yet it all can't be blamed on the market; artists still do make the art. Sherrie Levine has never done anything I'd consider a good work of art, but she used to have a few shreds of moral authority—the authority of the quirky critic of art life. She might have had it in her to become a gadfly, a curmudgeon, one of those eccentrics who know what's going on, point a finger, follow things moment by moment, glory in their own pessimism and despair. Instead, she's going to end up among the hordes of the famous ones; she'll probably soon be turning out lithographs in editions of a hundred. At least Marcel Duchamp knew the hand he was playing, and played it to the bitter end. Sherrie Levine dosn't even have the guts to play by her own rules. The cash registers started ringing and she came running.

Bronzes. The work in William Tucker's show at David McKee in September held you, but at a certain distance. Completed in 1985, this trio of bronze monoliths with Greek God names (*Ouranos, Gaia, Tethys*) followed hard on the group of *Gymnasts* that Tucker finished mostly in 1984 and showed at McKee in 1985. Like the *Gymnasts,* the Greek Gods are casts after plaster models (they're roughly seven feet high) and have irregular, rumpled surfaces. In the *Gymnasts,* the basic shape was a slab that had been folded in one place to create a flexing, figural form, and all the surface activity seemed a bit of an afterthought. In the God sculptures the rough-hewn skins do make a convincing match with the hulking, bulging forms. One critic has compared the Gods—which are like giants' body parts (an arm with a fist, a leg with a calf or an instep)—to the clunky figures in Philip Guston's late paintings. The Gods have a slow, flexing power; Tucker's Rodin-ish aspirations come to the fore in the romantically twisting or up-reaching impulse of the forms. Like Guston, Tucker is interested in forms that come out of a mysterious, primitive world. There's also something tamped-down, subdued about the Gods. Tucker may want to convey the impersonality of archaic idols; he may also be trying to create an overall impression that is too elegant. In their weighty way, *Ouranos, Gaia,* and *Tethys* are oddly demure. For works about beginnings—about the Birth of Sculpture—there's an excessive concern with achieving a neat total effect, the aura of Art.

At fifty-two, William Tucker can look back on a quarter-century career during which he's both moved with the times and maintained a certain discriminating distance from the times. His Sixties work, with its smooth, high-tech forms, comprised an intelligent man's guide to Sixties style. The work had a Pop edge, but it was tempered by a strong grounding in the David Smith-Anthony Caro line. In the Seventies, using industrial materials, Tucker looked like a more sensible Richard Serra, giving building materials a light, elegant, sketchlike feel. Nowadays, working in bronze, Tucker wants old-time solidity, but in a modern mood. If he was once a moderate who insisted on making objects rather than anti-objects, he's now a moderate who holds off from some of the extremely figural implications of bronze. With Tucker the sense of the present is always modified by a fixed idea of quality. He will never go for broke; he's obviously an artist who believes in generally accepted, gradually evolving values. He rejects all extreme positions—the extremely voguish, the extremely personal. He makes us believe that there's some ground that we're standing on together, and this is attractive. If you don't give yourself entirely to Tucker's work, it may be because he doesn't give himself entirely, either. He's lyrical but level-

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headed; he draws us in with his intelligence, his refinement, his care.

Ingredients. If all the return to painting is going to amount to is the kind of canvases that David Storey showed at Hirschl & Adler Modern in October, it probably would have been better if the avant-garde had left painting for dead. With Storey serious abstraction is just another ingredient to be dumped into the pluralist stew. Storey may paint in oil on canvas, he may manipulate the paint in different ways (smearing, dripping, drawing), he may use geometric and biomorphic and Surrealist forms that have a long history—but so what? The figures (which include humanoids à la Matta, and Arpish doo-dads) have no weight or individuality. They're all interchangeable. The color (Stephen Sprouse day-glo greens and oranges, reds and blues) cancels out; it's all-color no-color. The overlaps don't build space. The result is visual chaos posing as meaningfulness.

The Storey catalogue includes an essay by Stephen Westfall, a painter who has emerged in the past couple of years as a spokesman for the "new" abstraction. (Westfall's own work looks disturbingly like the late Myron Stout's —whether in a spirit of homage or appropriation I cannot tell.) Westfall uses Storey's paintings as the occasion to work up one of the art world's favorite fantasies—the merger of high and low art. Such alliances have been known to take place from time to time with interesting results, but in Westfall's account the aesthetic perils are overlooked in favor of a woozy do-gooder's prescription to make nice and join together. Westfall says, "I sometimes see [Storey's] imagery as walking a tight rope over the abyss between the museum and the cocktail napkin cartoon." But Storey's work is like an art director's view of high modernism—it's all decorative effects. The only artist Westfall mentions who has anything to do with Storey is Matta; even here Storey misses the essence of his model. Storey can't approach the schlocky space-age aura that gives the best Mattas their interest; he makes Matta's weird visions tasteful. Tastefulness isn't seriousness. And as for the "cocktail napkin cartoon," Storey's paintings don't contain any cartoons. Anyway, I doubt if the artist comprehends the stylistic integrity of popular decoration. The passages in his work which recall decor don't echo the fumblings of Middle America but rather the highest reaches of Alvar Aalto's plywood furniture, Gilbert Rhode's tubular chrome chairs, the pottery of Russel Wright. These are great designers whose grasp of formal integration is way beyond Storey. Westfall calls Storey a "synthesizer." Paste-up artist is more like it.

Memorials. Painting, one of the most solitary of occupations, only goes on so long as there's a community of artists that supports the individual's work; and when an artist who has meant something to other artists dies, the community gathers together to commiserate and commemorate. Although I didn't know Gretna Campbell, I know many of her friends, and agree with them that her death this past summer at the age of sixty-five was a considerable loss to the community—a loss that elicited too little attention in the press. Sixty-five isn't young; but for an artist it isn't old, either.

Campbell was the subject of two shows in New York during November, as well as a memorial service at a Quaker meeting house downtown. At the Ingber Gallery, with which Campbell had been associated for fifteen years, were gathered together the turbulently lyrical works (landscapes and studio nudes) of the last fifteen months of her life. At the New York Studio School, where Campbell had first taught in the school's halcyon days in the early Seventies, a show called "Early and Late" juxtaposed this later work, full of agitated brushwork, with the delicate, more systematically abstracted landscapes of the Fifties, the first decade of Campbell's career. The Studio School show, beautifully chosen by Louis Finkelstein (who was Campbell's husband and is a painter of kindred sensibility), gave a strong sense of the trajectory of the career. Among

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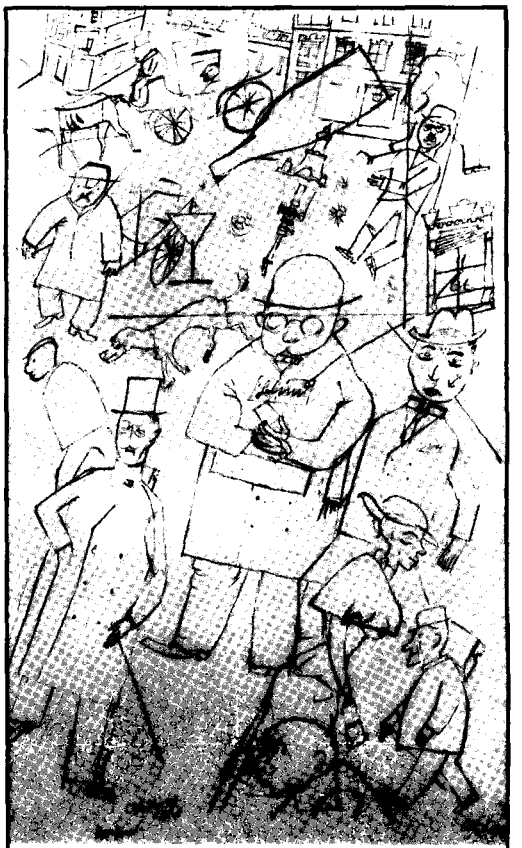
the very earliest works, from 1949-50, were a group of self-consciously antiquarian paintings, much influenced by the crisp form-sense of trecento painting, of women sitting in rural settings. These gave no hint of the changeableness of nature which was to become one of Campbell's central ideas; but they were interesting nonetheless for establishing a motif—the figure in the landscape. Soon enough the figure itself was to disappear from Campbell's out-of-doors; and yet isn't the figure always there, as the intelligence of the artist who sees with us and guides us through the natural world?

At "Early and Late" the robustness of Campbell's later work was contrasted with the thinner, clearer manner of the landscape paintings of the mid-Fifties, full of olive groves and, to quote the title of one painting, the *Remembrance of Provence.* The canvases of the Fifties, quite rich in color, are often built up out of a narrow, longish, rather regular brushstroke that Campbell certainly saw as an evocation of Cézanne. To us, though, these strokes, adding up to a delicate, mobile tracery, suggest not Cézanne but the mood of modern art in the years after World War II. There are connections between Campbell's style in this work and the hand in the abstract ink drawings of Nicolas de Staël, in the early Philip Guston abstractions, in the paintings of Joan Mitchell. Period style, when honestly achieved, can express a period mood. Of course this Fifties style of Campbell's is connected to Cubism, but to a Cubism that's been released from Cubism's tight architectural structure. In Campbell's Fifties landscapes there's a tendency to let things give way at the corners and the sides. She leaves the image a bit incomplete, as an Abstract Expressionist might, and the very irresolution of the pictures yields a melancholy dimension, perhaps because the artist is so conscious of the completeness of nature, which she can neither encompass nor deny.

The later work is wonderfully artful; Campbell's technique is subtler, more richly nuanced. Also, as she becomes thoroughly loyal to nature—and therefore more



George Grosz, *Blinde auf der Strasse,* 1916

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involved with traditional questions of representation—she finds herself taking on a new, difficult relation to the history of modern art. If for Monet landscape painting, an improvisation before nature, signified the ultimate revolt against museum art, at the hand of an artist such as Campbell painting a landscape turns out to be an act committed within tradition and in confirmation of tradition. Campbell's squarish formats, and her fondness for motifs that are boxed in by hedges, orchards, shrubs, streams—all this suggests a sense that options aren't infinite, that there are limits to what a person can comprehend. In a catalogue essay Finkelstein describes the working-up of the paintings from squared-off drawings, how Campbell prepared herself for the ultimate assault of paintstrokes, the creation of a rich, interesting, agitated surface. Campbell uses paint in a variety of ways—brushing, scraping, scratching, drawing. The focus and emphasis shift inch by inch. Campbell doesn't see the parts of the landscape as fitting neatly together, as they do in a Marquet or a Morandi. Here structure is found within perception rather than imposed upon perception. The odd, unbalanced relations that Campbell discovers between a tree and a house and a distant hill are closest in feeling to Constable and perhaps some other English landscape painters. There's also something English about Campbell's hedges, roses, twisting vines. In the shape of Campbell's career the late paintings are a triumph of honesty, of directness. Memorable are the wrenching, unbalanced interactions of green and purple; the turmoil of high-keyed colors resolving but never quite resolving into peculiar grays. Campbell's rhythm is uneven, romantically unpredictable, with large sweeping movements leading into quick, jumpy ones. For her nature is a drunken dance to music by Brahms, with dancers in costumes of rose and purple, olive and gray.

At Ingber, I was particularly interested in a painting of a cemetery in Stillwater, Connecticut. It was difficult not to feel in the choice of motif something more autobiographical, or at least more overtly emblematic, than is the case in most of Campbell's work. The light here—an eerie, tarnished, golden yellow—is disarming and even tragic, with some of a seventeenth-century Dutchman's sense of landscape as a cosmic mood poem.

At Gretna Campbell's memorial service several of Campbell's ex-students spoke of the artist as a teacher, of her influence. From the people I know who knew Campbell I've always had the sense of a person strong, intelligent, assertive. She was buried on the coast of Maine, near Cranberry Isle, where for years she'd had a summer home and gone out on her bicycle each day to look for the motif. Her intelligence, her vital place in the art life of the city, were all perfectly natural for a painter of landscape—which is historically the product of a highly sophisticated urban consciousness. In Finkelstein's catalogue essay there's a considerable effort to look clearly at the loss and to do justice to the work. (Writing his essay in the midst of the current art scene, Finkelstein would have had good cause to ask himself, "If I don't give Campbell her due, who will?") "Each year," he observes, "her language became more sure, more supple, more venturesome. Her color opened up, and also her space, pulling the viewer's attention from close at hand, the 'entry' into depth and back again to the surface. She was still discovering the resources of this taut space and newly vibrant color during her final illness." It's always so easy to talk about how bad the times are. Gretna Campbell is one of the ones we will think of when we think about how good the times have been.

Kids. I took my son and another five-year-old to see the Red Grooms retrospective at the Whitney Museum. They spent about half an hour climbing around Grooms's comic mock-ups of New York City, Chicago, a Wild West rodeo, and were then ready to go home. Yes, the Grooms show was something that kids enjoyed. But parents who believe that they've given their kids a cultural experience by sending them in and out of the revolving door of Grooms's teetering

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scale-model of the Woolworth Building are kidding themselves. Grooms at the Whitney was a happening, a thing unto itself. It has its own addled integrity, but will prepare kids and grown-ups for nothing but more of the same.

In the Sixties, Red Grooms performed in Rudy Burkhardt's witty experimental movies about life in New York, and made his own wistfully humorous relief paintings, which took their autobiographical subjects from his summers in Maine and trips to Paris. Indeed, Grooms had been a long-time member of the downtown scene when in 1976 at the age of thirty-nine he erected *Ruckus Manhattan* at the Marlborough Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street and caught the imagination of the city. (*Ruckus Manhattan* had already been shown downtown as a work-in-progress.)

Ruckus Manhattan gave uptown audiences a downtowner's picaresque view of our decaying town; but Grooms had no choice other than to coarsen his effects as he transformed what had been an intimist art of shadow boxes and insider's humor into this hulking scale. Going fully three-dimensional, into chicken-wire and papier-mâché, he gave his funny cast of characters a heavier quality. From *Ruckus Manhattan* onward, Grooms's figures recall the polychromed works of Raymond Mason, an English artist and longtime resident of Paris who has also in recent years attempted a public art. (Mason's *Departure of Fruits and Vegetables from the Heart of Paris 28 February 1969* is now on permanent display in the Church of St. Eustache on the edge of the new shopping center at Les Halles.)

Grooms is a good-natured flaneur who provides the well-heeled public with a guide to the street life and streetscape that it spends so much time and money trying to avoid. There are some fine little grace notes in *Ruckus Manhattan,* like the models of the Dubuffet sculptures and the Noguchi Garden at Chase Plaza in lower Manhattan. Somehow Grooms manages to infuse his models with the knowing attitude of the downtowner who walks by Chase Plaza and says, "Hey, those artists are the guys who made it big." Some of Grooms's earliest paintings were inspired by Dubuffet, and now Grooms, following in Dubuffet's footsteps, has made it big, too. Grooms just goes on creating his Ruckus Universe. One would like to say he gets worse; that ought to be the price for repetition. I'm not convinced that he is getting worse, except in the sense that he becomes less interesting as he remains the same. Fly him anywhere in the world and he'll have—a Red Grooms reaction. He's the not-so-innocent downtowner being not-so-amazed.

Happenings. In the corner of Marian Goodman's big, beautiful white box of a gallery on Fifty-seventh Street, Giulio Paolini, a member of Italy's Arte Povera movement, set up a bit of controlled chaos: a table made out of a sheet of glass and two black metal saw-horses, on which were dumped a music stand, a metal painter's tripod, some paper, and drafting equipment. A lamp, sprawled below, shot light toward an empty canvas suspended from the ceiling. The mix of black and chrome, metal and glass, was clarifying, an essence of high-tech chic. Carefully skewed and splayed, Paolini's found objects added up to a pretty little rumpus, a post-Minimalist Attributes of the Arts. This was nifty work, a gray butterfly of an invention, to catch out of the corner of your eye as you made the rounds of the galleries in October.

Ghosts. At Sperone Westwater, during Susan Rothenberg's show in October and November, gallery-goers stepped carefully and spoke in hushed tones, just as they had at Jasper Johns's show at Leo Castelli last winter. They'd come to Sperone expecting serious work, and serious they would be. What they saw were figures somewhere between skeletons and ghosts, floating or swimming through a flickery, brushy space. Susan Rothenberg wants us to believe in a world of twilight, a world of after-images. Many of her spectral forms are refracted, repeated, like passing figures in Futurist

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paintings. Rothenberg's canvases can be quite large—in the range of ten feet wide—and her brushstrokes, which are more mechanical than lyrical, go around in circles, like benedictions to the void. The work is all void. The last thing a mystic artist can afford to be is vague, and yet vague Rothenberg will be. She's an inscrutable, uncertain guide to the world of dreams. Rothenberg denies us the pleasure of fantasy art, which is the pleasure of finding fleeting images given concrete form.

Wrinkles. Though the Lucien Freud retrospective, which was at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., this fall, won't come to New York, Freud, an Englishman aged sixty-five, is a painter that New York is very much aware of. When he first showed his tightly rendered, insistently unromantic figures and portraits in New York at Davis and Long (now Davis and Langdale) in 1978, people argued about them. Were they daring or academic? Since then a lot of good things have happened for Lucien Freud: a monograph by Lawrence Gowing has appeared; he's had the cover of *Artforum* magazine; and his *Large Interior W. 11 (After Watteau)* (1981-83) has been widely hailed as a masterpiece of modern figuration. Freud's show at the Hirshhorn was a sort of pendant to the "Representation Abroad" show that the Hirshhorn's former curator, Joe Shannon, organized in 1985. Like "Representation Abroad," the Freud retrospective highlighted a type of realist painting that hasn't garnered much museum attention in the United States since World War II. One wonders if the acceptance of these European paintings has something to do with their not being done by Americans. Is realism seen as an Old World sort of thing? At "Representation Abroad" the glamour of certain European associations—famous friends, distinguished themes—seemed to add a luster to many of the artists and much of the art. In Lucien Freud's case it certainly can't hurt to be a grandson of Sigmund Freud's. The audience's curiosity is piqued.

Freud sets most of his nudes and portraits in rather shabby bohemian surroundings. Occasionally he does a cityscape which continues the bleak mood. He invariably paints in gray and brown, and he doesn't give his tones any reach, any lyric surprise. The color is the color of magazine illustrations—flat, inexpressive. Mostly Freud is interested in wrinkles and blotches and sags. He's unrelenting; what a literal rendering of flesh won't accomplish, paint handling will. Freud's faces, which are worked over for months and sometimes years, are full of ridges and creases of paint that don't follow the form and make the features appear worm-eaten, acid-etched. Freud brings us low, no question about it, but once he's got us there he just leaves us to fend for ourselves. There's no illumination; you don't ultimately see things clear.

Detail work may have some a priori value; perhaps it demonstrates a certain sort of seriousness. Certainly it breeds respect in the audience. The audience goes to Freud because he tells the truth. People go in the same spirit as they go to Richard Avedon's photographs of old people—with a stiff upper lip, as if this must be good for them. Freud has the added feather in his cap that he actually manufactures every imperfection by hand. When Freud does his no-holds-barred renditions of male genitalia or a woman's breasts he's bearing witness—but to what? (It's the same question you may ask after going through a room full of Avedons.) Yes, Freud fills us in on a certain slice of post-empire England, where everybody is beyond hope. These characters, especially the young latter-day hippies, seem to say, "Though we've led honest, even unconventional lives, we're miserable, anyway." All Freud gives us is surface; it's a Masterpiece Theater view of the English condition. Rendering is moralizing, details are insights, or so the logic of Freud's paintings goes.

Englishness has a certain cachet in these postmodern times, probably because English art has rarely been, properly speaking, modern art. A painter like Freud seems to be neither for nor against modern art, and his

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out-of-it-ness can appear chic. We're at a strange point in the history of taste when Balthus, an artist very much equal to the grand tradition, receives mixed reviews, and a sort of academic novelty act like Freud is showered with praise. I can only guess that far too much is at stake in Balthus. If Balthus is the true heir of Courbet, Seurat, and Bonnard, then the history of modern art must be rewritten to include him. Freud can't claim to be the heir of anything, and therefore he can be admired without there being any dangerous implications. Freud's paintings are natural curiosities. We look at *The Artist's Mother Resting* and remark on how strangely the splotches on her face match the splotchy pattern on her dress.

Classics. It may be Neo-Geo that emboldened the Sidney Janis Gallery to mount its first Auguste Herbin show since 1974; but one could care not at all for most of the current geometric painting and still be grateful for a large gathering of works by one of the finest European abstractionists of the post-World War II period. Though Herbin was a part of the Constructivist scene in Paris in the Thirties, it was only as geometric abstraction was fading from view after the war that he found his way to a style which had some of the assurance we associate with the artists of the Bauhaus, revolutionary Russia, and De Stijl. Herbin recalls the Neo-plastic painters in his devotion to a system that is both flexible and clearly defined, as well as in his adherence to strict frontality and his rejection of overlaps. Herbin's system, which permits the full range of hues and circles and triangles as well as right-angled forms, has a special evocative power. Though Herbin was a fervent anti-Surrealist, there's something anthropomorphic, Kandinskyish, in the way his rows and stacks suggest the figural, the seasonal. Working within a limited system, Herbin achieves a wide range of effects, and gives to his variously placed and grouped triangles, circles, and squares different qualities of movement and stress. (Sophie Taueber-Arp must have been a major influence.) There are rising and falling compositions; works that oppose the tightly stacked to the loosely arrayed; and contrasts of sunnier and darker-toned hues. As in the mature work of the American Neo-plastic painter Ilya Bolotowsky (another case of a Constructivist who really bloomed after World War II) the combination of unpainterly, hard-edged forms and ripe, throbbing color breaks new emotional ground.

Janis's Herbin show was only one of the exhibits this fall that added dimensions or shadings to our sense of modern art. (In an art capital we expect these backward glances, these studies in the way we were.) Grace Borgenicht's André Derain show was the best of several New York gallery exhibits that in the last fifteen years have been devoted to the post-Fauvist work of this important painter (he died in 1954). The still lifes, landscapes, and portraits in the Borgenicht show, mostly very small, had a beautiful clarity of purpose, the eloquence of challenges isolated and taken on one by one. You could move around a woman's face, enjoy the darkness of her hair against the lightness of her skin, appreciate how the eyes, nose, brow fit into the sphere of the head. Elsewhere a vase full of flowers sent its blossoms off in this and that direction, so that one zinnia seemed to confront us head on while another turned away, acted almost shy; and there was the greenness of a little park, with the luxuriant tree in the foreground, the picturesque bridge just behind. And there were lovely drawings, too—portraits and wonderful deep landscape views.

In the past few years Derain's work has become easier to see in France: the Guillaume Collection, recently installed at the Orangerie in Paris, contains some of the most famous works of the Twenties; and the Museum of Modern Art in Troyes, consisting of the collection of the industrialist Pierre Lévy, has much of the most important work from the Thirties through the Fifties. I must confess to being among those who have come back from the Orangerie and Troyes feeling less ecstatic than I'd hoped to feel based on the vigorous appreci-

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ations of the later Derain we've had from Giacometti and Leland Bell. Borgenicht's show made me think again. It had the not inconsiderable virtue of allowing us to judge Derain's very elusive aesthetic on our own home ground.

Other shows of modern classics, major and minor, during the fall: Cubist Picasso at the new Jan Krugier Gallery; "The Cologne Progressives," a close-up look at German trends in the early decades of the century, at Rachel Adler; André Masson at Marisa del Re; Richard Stankiewicz at Zabriskie. The Léger retrospective at the Acquavella Gallery was a stunner, in many respects superior to the retrospective that was mounted at the Albright-Knox Gallery in 1982 to celebrate the centenary of the artist's birth. And there were, as always, wonderful School of Paris paintings to be seen along Madison Avenue, in the windows of Davlyn and the front room of Perls.

Jeans. Holt Quentel, who had her first show at the Stux Gallery in November, calls her works paintings, but they're really more like banners, these blackish-gray emblems (one letter, one shape) inscribed on distressed, unraveled pieces of canvas that hang loose from the wall. Quentel's pictures look like stone-washed, pre-torn Levis that are meant to decorate the home, and they automatically made me think of the rage for distressed, very seriously torn jeans that hit New York last summer. Nothing else came to mind. The catalogue (and what, this season, is a show without a catalogue?) brought a perplexed gallery-goer the news that the whole show was already in the hands of collectors, among them Barbara and Eugene Schwartz, Trisha Collins and Richard Milazzo, Emily and Jerry Spiegel, and . . . the Saatchis. Things are definitely hopping at the Stux Gallery, for what reason I can't begin to guess. Here the mysteries of art are overwhelmed by the mysteries of commerce.

Zombies. In 1986, David Salle received a Guggenheim Award to work on set designs for the dancer and choreographer Karole Armitage and her Armitage Ballet. The company came to the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival in November, bringing an evening made up of two ballets. In *The Tarnished Angels,* to the music of Charlie Mingus, the dancers wear Christian Lacroix costumes and dance in front of David Salle drops in a style that telescopes Parisian café-concert and cabaret behavior from the Nineties through the Twenties. (One of Salles drops was of dead fish, perhaps a pun on the dancer's fishnet stockings.) In *The Elizabethan Phrasing of the Late Albert Ayler* the David Salle sets dominated the ballet, with the dancing itself only one element in a collage of scrims and backdrops and elaborate stage props. Armitage has set *The Elizabethan Phrasing* to jive monologues by Lord Buckley, to Webern, Stravinsky, and the folk-jazz of Albert Ayler. *The Elizabethan Phrasing* is a high-toned curio shop of a theater piece, with dribs and drabs of Fifties aesthetics presented to the audience like knickknacks in an étagère. Karole Armitage wasn't inside the spirit of the Graham and Balanchine ballets she had taken as her models for the occasion; and David Salle wasn't inside the Noguchi, Picabia, and Pop Art he was spinning off of. (In all fairness, even Picabia wasn't inside Picabia.) Nor were Salle and Armitage exactly outside of their sources—Camping, spoofing. One could see a theme in the unwinding of the décor's iconography, with its eyes and lights and light fixtures, but it was something to be contemplated as a mental construction, not an emotional one. *The Elizabethan Phrasing* was a parade of SoHo good taste—Balanchine, Noguchi, Lord Buckley, on and on. Salle's and Armitage's mandarin cool looks to me like the cool of those who haven't had to learn things for themselves, who take everything for granted. They're just taking up what others have already declared to be the best. If they'd found it on their own, maybe they wouldn't be so quick to mix and match, collage and juxtapose.

Paul Berman, in an interesting article on "The Face of Downtown" in *Dissent*'s spe-

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cial New York issue, has this to say about the work of David Salle: "Looking at his paintings, you can't help posing Big Questions, to which come back dismissive answers in the vernacular. It puts you off balance. Being off balance makes the true downtowner feel more at ease, because off balance is how he feels inside." The concert-goers at the Armitage Ballet were definitely downtown, but they weren't acting as if Salle and Armitage were putting them off balance at all. They sat quietly, attentively, and left like people who'd gotten just what they'd expected. Paul Berman may be a few beats behind SoHo aesthetics. Robert Pincus-Witten, who wrote an article on the Salle-Armitage collaboration for the November/December issue of *Artscribe,* sees this pair as having gone way beyond off-balance into something that sounds awfully like the balance of high classicism. "Irresolution and paradox, the bombardment of heterogeneous anachronism of dance, set and costumes, resolve into a new model of coherence. A perfectly credible world unfolds in community with the fantasy of transcendence, even as this latter credo, Modernism's underpinning, is arraigned." "Credible"? Incredible.

The Elizabethan Phrasing of the Late Albert Ayler is the creation of collectors, not of artists. Sources have been marshaled, but the transforming power of art doesn't come into it at all. Perhaps the schools are to be blamed for spawning a generation that knows art images but has no art fever. Whatever the reason, what generally passes for sophistication today is something more like anthologization. David Storey's paintings are collections of abstract-art ideas. David Salle's sets are collections of Fifties imagery. At Meyer Vaisman's show at Castelli in November the one painting that held me for a minute or two was a collection of thirty-two small oval canvases mounted together. All of these were printed with Vaisman's signature canvas pattern, and about half of them contained, in addition, profiles from coins and medals of ancient, Renaissance, and more recent times. The range of color in the Vaisman—black, white, blue, rust—and the slightly clunky photomechanical reproduction process brought to mind the Italian pottery of the Fifties, Fornasetti ware, which was often decorated with photomechanical reproductions of interesting old things—including coins. Fornasetti is a hot collectible nowadays, and Vaisman obviously knows it; for all I know he doesn't know the difference between buying a Fornasetti ashtray decorated with photomechanical reproductions of Roman coins and hanging some photomechanical reproductions of Roman coins in a gallery. Collecting isn't making art, and although collecting is amusing, amazing, addictive, it becomes frightening when it's confused with making art.

The collecting sensibility as a gallery phenomenon peaked in early December with the show called "Fictions," organized by Douglas Blau, and consisting of "A Selection of Pictures from the 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries." A joint effort of Kent Fine Art and the Curt Marcus Gallery, "Fictions" featured landscapes and interiors, all related by a hyper-real, romantic sensibility and ranging from the nostalgic to the scientific to the futuristic. There were nineteenth-century landscape paintings, movie stills, magazine illustrations. In part the show was meant to build a context for the work of such contemporary artists as Mark Tansey, who shows at Curt Marcus, and Komar and Melamid, the Russian immigrants who show at Ronald Feldman and were represented by *Scenes from the Future: Museum of Modern Art,* in which the ruins of the museum fill the middle ground of a bucolic, post-Decline-and-Fall Manhattan.

Sundered from their narrative underpinnings, the images in "Fictions" became elements in curator Douglas Blau's free-floating fantasy, which was most interesting for a sort of subversive homoerotic sensibility that ran through a good third of the selections. In the context of "Fictions," Charles H. Stephens's *Anatomical Lecture of Dr. William Williams Keen* (1879, oil on cardboard), with the doctor standing in front of a classroom talking about a young man

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on whose bare torso he rests his hand, suggests interests other than the scientific. The many pictures with groups of men (generals, scientists, actors) can be read as groups of good-looking guys doing mysterious things together. And the many landscapes with a man, generally youthful, looking off into the distance suggest the subtle melancholy sexiness of unrequited love. (The catalogue, which contains reproductions of many works not included in the show, makes Blau's theme even more overt than the show itself.)

The fun of finding hidden subtexts is the fun of Camp, and it's something that many of us who have been looking at images in recent years enjoy. We can wonder if the lines of attraction and the relationships that we see in these images are figments of our imaginations or were actually lodged there by the artists. On a low level, "Fictions" is about this kind of free-form thinking; it's about the out-of-controlness of images. The mood is unreal, muffled, and this heightens the drama of all these nice, clean-cut nineteenth- and twentieth-century fellows who are engaged (or are being engaged by us) in some obscure yet passionate kind of thing.

The installation of "Fictions," in which small pictures were hung with a great deal of white wall space between them, looked like something out of the latest issues of *House & Garden*. This was a show that threw you back on your taste, your cleverness, and coming upon it in an art gallery during a morning or afternoon when you were trying to look at art (when you were trying to get involved with art) you were derailed. I'm not convinced that the pleasures of Camp and trash are totally divorced from the pleasures to be derived from the best painting and sculpture; but in the "Fictions" show, where Camp is given a high-art sheen, Campiness becomes little more than a diversionary tactic. The operative experience in art is the experience of being implicated—of feeling your way into a thing and feeling how it feels when it envelops you. The operative experience at "Fictions" was distance, our looking at all those cool little rectangles on the wall and feeling superior to them, analyzing their every quirk. No wonder Douglas Blau could get away with hanging some real old-fashioned schlock (paintings by Joseph Hirsch and Maxfield Parrish) and making them look elegant. When you're not implicated, you're not feeling the art, and good and bad dissolve. Curator Douglas Blau is doing exactly the same thing as painter Meyer Vaisman and set designer David Salle: they're collecting the past. I like many of the things they collect. I hate the way they throw their collections at us as if they were art.

"Fictions" was a show that turned the image world into a world of zombies, and yet two prestigious galleries devoted a great deal of time and energy to it, and the critics praised it, and the public came. Does it take a zombie to love a zombie? And who or what will the zombies turn into a zombie next?

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Music

Ruminations on the romantic piano

by Samuel Lipman

Recently I found myself on a pre-concert panel, discussing the glorious past and problematic present of what the panel's organizers called "the romantic piano." The panel took place in an atmosphere resembling more an inquest than a celebration, for lately there has been much talk—and more evidence—of a major shift in attitudes toward this quintessential instrument of nineteenth-century music.

Some of this shift involves the hard facts of commerce. After many years of declining activity by American piano-makers, and their gathering replacement by highly rationalized suppliers in the Far East, it is now accepted that annual piano sales will never again achieve the levels of the past. What the older among us think of as a true piano—a mechanical agglomeration of wood, metal, and felt—has now been re-christened the "acoustic" piano. This antique (and expensive) Victorian behemoth is being supplanted by inexpensive electronic keyboards vastly easier to house and to play. If one is to trust the sales literature, playing these gadgets of the transistor age is more a matter of choosing software than practicing finger exercises or learning harmony. Thus an advertisement in last month's *Stereo Review* spoke glowingly of just how gratifying music-making can be with these new keyboards (at a cost of under two hundred dollars):

> It's chopsticks time in musicland. Now you can play any of 12 totally different instruments, and have 12 different rhythm sections backing you up automatically.
>
> And what if you don't play? Well, if you sing, this incredible new chordmaker will combine auto-rhythm with your choice of chords to accompany you.
>
> It's amazing. It's like having a skilled band backing you up. If you want to sing in the key of G, just touch G, and let the concert begin.

As the instruments being played have changed, so have the people doing the playing. On the level of serious music study, the increased presence here of pianos from the Far East has been paralleled by the arrival of great numbers of Japanese and Korean piano students in our music schools. And there is increasing doubt that the brightest American students are choosing to play the piano, or to devote their lives to serious music at all. Among the population at large—uninterested in an arduous *Gradus ad Parnassum,* the title composer Muzio Clementi (1752-1832) chose for his standard piano exercises—the availability of cheap and easy-to-play instruments has spawned a new, and properly democratic, class of users quick to bend these new toys to the service of a loud, repetitive, and stripped-down musical product. This product is more the result, or so it seems to many, of emotional and intellectual primitivism than of the technological sophistication that makes all the noise possible.

Curiously, amidst all these changes in key-

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board instruments and their players, two closely associated areas of musical life have been little changed, save perhaps in the direction of slow contraction. Here I refer equally to the concert audience and to the concert repertory. In the case of the audience for the piano, I have the impression that piano recitals today are fewer in number than they once were, their place having been taken by ensemble and non-musical group attractions, most of them dance and theater. Those who do go to hear the piano come, so the studies show, from the same relatively well-educated, musically sophisticated, and economically affluent groups that have supported the piano since the beginning of its conquest of the public two centuries ago; this group now seems less sure of itself, less willing to use its tastes in the service of cultural leadership, than was once the case.

As far as the repertory is concerned, the situation is simple: the famous pieces sell, and the selling pieces are famous. Teachers specialize in the great pieces of the repertory, and piano students pay them a kind of dedicated attention they show to no other music. Audiences react in an unbuttoned way to what they know, and critics display their finest bits of knowledge in evaluating the performances of accepted masterpieces. Just what these accepted masterpieces are is known by everyone: among solo pieces a few sonatas of Beethoven, many of the works of Chopin, several large suites of Schumann, the most brilliant (and tacky) pieces of Liszt, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and *Gaspard de la Nuit* of Ravel. Among concertos the list is equally restricted, to works by Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Liszt, and, of course, Mozart.

This is the core of the "romantic piano." Written over a period of hardly more than a hundred and twenty-five years, this is the music specialized in, with different kinds of concentration, by the greatest "romantic" twentieth-century pianists of the various national schools—Russian (Hofmann, Rachmaninoff, and Horowitz), German (Schnabel and Fischer), and French (Cortot, Casadesus, and the German-born Gieseking); a brilliant musical polymath like Arthur Rubinstein (who, though deeply Polish, did not really arise out of any national school) played the whole of this core repertory, adding to it music of the early twentieth century, including that of the Spaniard De Falla, the Brazilian Villa-Lobos, and the most fetching work of the French charmer Poulenc. Elsewhere, great pianists added to this canon the solo music of Bach, Mozart, and Schubert. What changes there have been in the repertory to the present day have mostly taken place in the concerto literature, with the addition of the concertos of Rachmaninoff, along with the B-flat minor concerto of Tchaikowsky, the Second and the Third Concertos of Prokofiev, and perhaps—just perhaps—the Second Concerto of Bartok.

Of all the pieces included above, the most recently composed—the Bartok Second Concerto (1931) and the Rachmaninoff *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* (1934)—were written more than fifty years ago. A few solo pieces written later, among them the Prokofiev Sonata no. 7 (1942) and the Barber Sonata (1949), have defied the odds to become part of the celebrity repertory. Among more or less recent concertos, only the Bartok Third (1945) manages to lead a fitful life in the concert hall.

Here, then, is the "romantic" piano repertory as it stands today, wildly successful and suffocatingly constricted. Played by young and old pianists alike, taught by young and old teachers alike, this is the repertory that wows audiences, beguiles critics, and wins contests. The ease young pianists thus find, through familiarity, in attracting and moving an audience is more than balanced by the inevitable comparisons so easily made between callow contemporary performances and the splendid musical conceptions preserved for all eternity on recordings. In this competition, it is difficult not to feel that youth, in its touching attempts at success through emulation, almost always loses.

From time to time, a new arrival attempts to break out of this rut of comparison and

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emulation. Such was the case with the much trumpeted Carnegie Hall debut recital in November of the Soviet émigré Vladimir Feltsman. The struggles of this tough-minded and tenacious artist in his homeland are by now well known to readers of the world press; his release from what amounted to involuntary servitude in the Soviet Union can, I suppose, be interpreted as a welcome symbol of *glasnost.* It can also be interpreted as a long overdue recompense for the deprivation of the most basic human rights, not just of artistic freedom but of freely chosen residence and travel.

For his Carnegie Hall recital, Feltsman chose a curious program. It began traditionally with the best known (and most comfortable) of Schubert sonatas, that in A major, opus 120; it ended traditionally, too, after the intermission, with the hallowed (and often performed) Schumann *Symphonic Etudes,* a technically exacting work made even more challenging by the pianist's inclusion of the posthumously published sections, which are often left out.

In Feltsman's case, however, it wasn't the opening and the closing of his program that seemed out of the ordinary: it was the middle work, coming just before the intermission. This selection—actually three excerpts from a much larger composition—was the French composer Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus* ("Twenty Aspects of the Infant Jesus") of 1944. It has always seemed a fascinating example, difficult to decipher and play, of extreme post-romantic piano writing, being pianistically flamboyant in its combination of clashing dissonances and almost saccharine harmonies. The work's stature, despite its undoubted interest, has always been affected by what was perceived as a palpable and paradoxical contradiction between Messiaen's pious Catholic devotion and an incompletely integrated modernist musical style.

But on this night last November in Carnegie Hall, before as glittering and traditionally sophisticated an audience as a New York piano recital has seen since Horowitz's return in 1965 and Sviatoslav Richter's American debut in 1960, Messiaen's *Vingt Regards* seemed not modernist, not dissonantal, not incompletely integrated, and not contradictory. Instead, the three excerpts Feltsman played—*"Nöel," "Première communion de la Vierge"* ("First Communion of the Virgin"), and *"Regards des prophètes, des bergers, et des Mages"* ("Views by the prophets, the shepherds, and the Magi")—seemed a brilliant and triumphant culmination of twentieth-century French piano writing, including the *Préludes,* the *Images,* and the *Etudes* of Debussy, and *Gaspard de la Nuit* (especially its final section, "*Scarbo*") of Ravel. Even more, Feltsman's playing of Messiaen managed to stake a claim for the composer in the not unrelated progression from the mystical Scriabin through that unappreciated Polish composer Karol Szymanowski. Indeed, this night, Messiaen's *Vingt Regards,* for all the incomprehensibility they formerly seemed to enshrine, now stood as fulfilling the promise of *Masques* (1916), Szymanowski's great set of three piano pieces.

As Feltsman played Messiaen, one was no longer conscious of the immensely talented duty with which he had played Schubert and Schumann; one was no longer conscious of the immense technical mastery he brought to these classic works, so loaded with traps for the unwary and the clumsy. In Feltsman's Messiaen, one heard and felt melody, color, sonorous resonance, sweep—and, above all, music. I can only add that in Feltsman's performance, Messaien seemed not just music, not just beautiful music, but great music.

Now in fact Feltsman had managed this hitherto unaccomplished miracle not by playing the piano in a "new" way, or by being in any way a "modern" pianist. In order to play the Messiaen he did not abandon his past, he fulfilled it. His playing in the Messiaen, as in the Schubert and Schumann, brought to the music the great virtues of the "romantic" pianist: depth of tone, fleetness of fingerwork, sureness of chord playing, rhythmic freedom across (rather than within) barlines, lyrical melody rather than the clatter of millions of

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notes, and above all the suppression of the piano as a percussive instrument in favor of its ability to convey the richness and diversity of orchestral color.

Here, surely, was one answer, if only one, to the survival of the "romantic" piano: new music, even unlikely new music, amalgamated into the tradition of the consensually validated great works of the past through the application of the best traditions of past performance. It would be heartwarming to report that Feltsman's achievement was recognized, both that night at Carnegie Hall and later in the critical press, for what it was. In the hall, filled as it was with piano cognoscenti, the reaction to the Messiaen seemed sadly lukewarm; the audience, quite plainly, had come for—and applauded—the old razzle-dazzle, not the new. The situation seemed the same with the critics. Though I haven't read all the press, it is my impression from the several major articles I have seen that, regardless of whether they raved over the pianist's Schubert and Schumann or not, Feltsman's vitalization of Messiaen was either quickly passed over (as in Donal Henahan's *Times* review the next morning), virtually ignored (as in Henahan's wrap-up piece about the concert in the following Sunday's paper), or roasted in comparison to the earlier performances of Messiaen's wife, Yvonne Loriod, and of Peter Serkin (as in Peter Davis's review in *New York* magazine).

And so the piano rut has been dug ever deeper. The message to young artists, as to old, is clear. Play safe pieces; concentrate on the most marketable of these guaranteed successes; above all, leave the audiences where you found them, changed only by having given up a significant amount of money to hear you play. To presenters the message is clear, too: schedule the famous, program the hackneyed, count the crowds. Then everything will exist in the best of all possible worlds. Artists (and their managers and publicity agents) will be famous and rich; audiences will feel complimented; and presenters, all full of enthusiastic audiences, will be able to apply for grants to hold panels on the demise of "the romantic piano." Who could complain?

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Dance

Tropical fever in midtown

by Eva Resnikova

At the gala opening of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's production of *The Magic of Katherine Dunham* at City Center in December, the first indication that this was going to be a different sort of evening at the ballet came during the seventy-eight-year-old choreographer's introductory curtain speech, when she casually referred to her dances as "numbers." Dunham's popular success dates from 1940, when she brought her revue *Tropics and Le Jazz Hot*—subtitled "From Haiti to Harlem"—to Broadway. Later that year she created the role of Georgia Brown and collaborated with George Balanchine on the choreography of *Cabin in the Sky*. Then it was on to Hollywood, where Dunham and her Dancers backed up Lena Horne in *Stormy Weather*. When she returned to Broadway it was under the management of Sol Hurok and, in the words of John Martin, the New York *Times*'s dance critic, "with a mantle of glamour about her shoulders." The run of Dunham's 1943 *Tropical Revue* had to be extended from two weeks to six, setting a record for a full evening of dance.

Edwin Denby, covering *Tropical Revue* for the *Herald Tribune,* pointed out to his readers that the evening was not a dance recital (which was the term the modern dancers then used to refer to their sporadic appearances at Broadway theaters on Sundays, when, owing to inscrutable blue laws, non-dance theatrical entertainment was proscribed), but that he wanted to talk about it as if it were. The present-day reviewer considering the Ailey company's full-length program of Dunham reconstructions is constrained to do so, since the dances are now being presented as works of historical significance performed by a serious modern-dance troupe.

Despite her stage persona, Katherine Dunham actually hails from untropical Illinois. Her interest in Afro-Caribbean dance was, literally, academic, leading her to earn an undergraduate degree in social anthropology from the University of Chicago in 1936 and then to pursue fieldwork on native dance and ritual in the West Indies. As a child in Joliet, and later in Chicago, Dunham had had some scattered training in ballet and modern dance. Since there were then virtually no opportunities for black dancers outside of vaudeville, she formed her own dance companies: Ballet Nègre in 1931 and the Negro Dance Group in 1937. Dunham also served as dance director for the WPA's Federal Theatre Project in Chicago. Her 1940 Broadway breakthrough was followed by twenty-five years on the international revue circuit.

Dunham forged a style that mingled elements of black ethnic dance—African, West Indian, and American—with ballet and modern. Her dancers had little formal training; but by all accounts, and from the glimpses we get of them in *Stormy Weather,* they were attractive performers gifted with a natural grace. Dunham's own personal appeal

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seems to have owed a great deal to an apparent reconciliation of opposites. Denby wrote that "her gestures are provocative and yet discreet"; Agnes de Mille spoke of "a most unusual combination of qualities: seductiveness—very real and very sweet—and humor"; Margaret Lloyd, the influential dance critic of the *Christian Science Monitor* and a Dunham enthusiast, wrote that "she could shimmy with the best of them . . . but somehow in everything she did she seemed too refined for her milieu."

The Ailey dancers started out at a double disadvantage. April Berry, the company's de facto prima (Ailey does not officially rank his dancers), is an accomplished ballerina, but she does not have the star quality that Dunham must have had. And, as is the norm today, the dancers are well versed in both ballet and modern. That this training got in the way of their performance became evident when the dancers were called upon to execute movements requiring the isolation of body parts, such as shoulder shimmying and pelvic gyrations —not easy when you've spent a professional lifetime conscientiously keeping shoulders and hips aligned. A few of the dancers managed these eccentric movements—notably Dudley Williams and Gary DeLoatch, both of whom list show-biz credits in their biographies. The rest faked it as best they could.

Given the dancers' facility in ballet, it was not surprising that the most successful of the reconstructions was the 1943 *Choros,* based on an early nineteenth-century Brazilian quadrille, which apes colonial European manners. With its formal floor patterns and steps and poses lifted directly from the classical ballet (including barefoot brisés and petits battements), *Choros* was the richest work in terms of pure choreography. The handsome costumes—yards of cascading white ruffles for the women, candy-striped trousers and pancake hats for the men—were properly mere icing. Other, choreographically weaker works often attempted to pass off such decorative effects as the whole cake.

The Magic of Katherine Dunham opened with "an exposition of the fundamentals of Dunham technique," consisting of stylized adagio exercises at the barre—lots of flexed feet and deep turned-in pliés—followed by travelling steps across the floor: first rhythmic walks, then increasingly virtuoso combinations and jumps. Coming directly after the rousing overture (amplified and talked through by the audience, Broadway-fashion), the hackneyed Albinoni Adagio lent an unfortunate air of sanctimoniousness to the proceedings.

The first act, "Afro-Caribbean Suite," began with *Afrique* (1950), which featured a disappointingly tame belly dance. After *Choros* came the all-male Cuban ritual of *Nanigo* (1938), followed by a charming comic genre scene, *Los Indios* (1941), in which two weary South American women on a journey stop to rest and are momentarily transported by the music of an itinerant flute player. *Shango* (1945) was a dramatized West Indian ritual involving the sacrifice of a white rooster, the possession of a boy by the snake god (which gives him a bad case of the shakes and makes him crawl on his belly), and his successful exorcism at the hands of the high priest.

Act Two consisted entirely of *L'Ag'ya* (1938), a tripartite dance drama of love, jealousy, and death set in an eighteenth-century Martinique fishing village. Despite its exotic setting, *L'Ag'ya* was the most conventional work of the evening, with the most conventional score, by Robert Sanders, at the time a faculty member of the Chicago Conservatory of Music.

The first scene, set in the marketplace, shows us the love of the hero and heroine (in three-quarter time) and the jealousy of the villain. In the second scene the villain ventures deep into an atmospheric forest and undergoes the terrors of the living dead in order to obtain a love charm from the cackling, pipe-smoking Roi Zombie (Dudley Williams), who sports a grass skirt, suit jacket, lorgnette, and top hat. The third scene begins with the villagers performing some exhibition group dances, including a Creole mazurka and the highly syncopated

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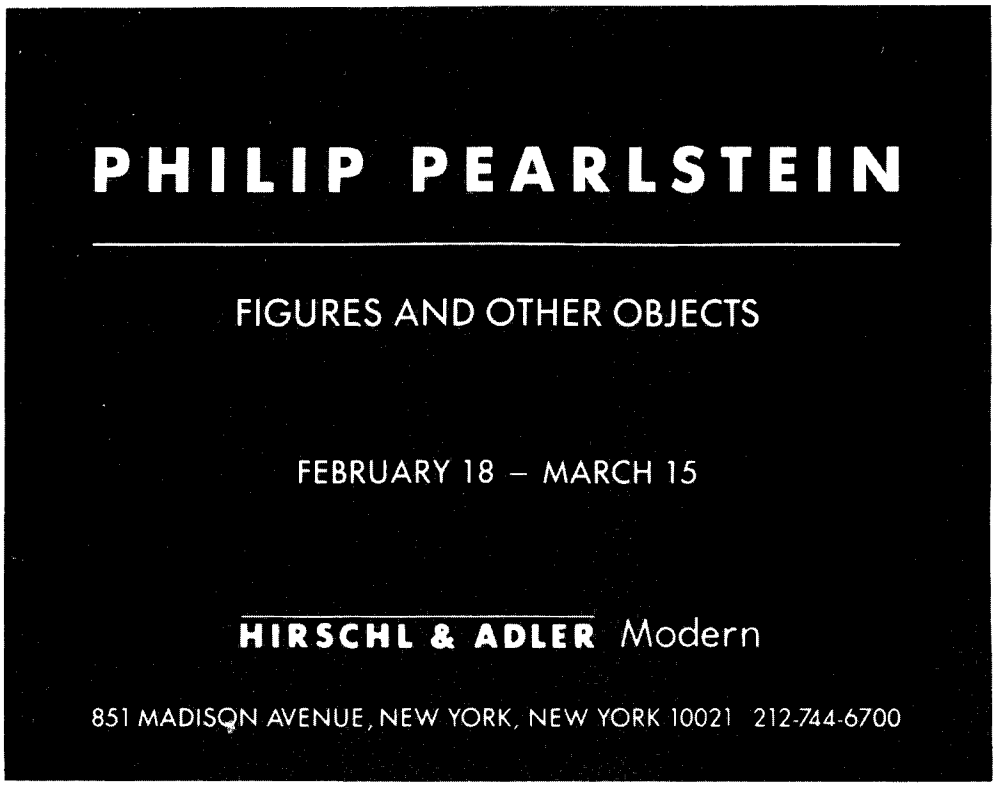
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beguine. The villain arrives and exposes the heroine to the love charm. Entranced, she performs a trembling dance and begins removing her clothes. In the nick of time, the hero manages to break loose of the spell and challenges the villain to the fighting dance of the title, which involves kung-fu-like kicks and ritualistic retreats into a wide second-position plié stance with rhythmically swaying hips (only the villain, Gary DeLoatch, got it right). Having seemingly won, the hero is about to claim his prize when the villain suddenly rises up and attacks him from behind, leaving the heroine to grieve over her lover's body, to a violin solo. That her dance of grief seems to be over before it even begins is emblematic of Dunham's problems with dramatic construction.

The third act, "Americana Suite," comprised black American dances ranging from the days of slavery to the Roaring Twenties. *Fieldhands* (1938) was a shuffling buck and wing for six men in Huck Finn straw hats and immaculate blue jeans and work shirts. *Plantation Dances* (1938) consisted of *Square Dance,* featuring some wry verbal commentary from the onstage caller, and *Juba,* which gave each of the men a chance at a solo turn. *Spirituals* (1938) was sung a cappella and illustrated by April Berry in then contemporary modern-dance style. *Flaming Youth* (1942) took place in a 1920s Chicago speakeasy populated by characteristic types: a Billie Holiday-style blues singer, pimps, flappers, *et al.* There's a cat fight and the cops raid the joint. *Barrelhouse* (1938), described as a "Florida Swamp Shimmy," was a pas de deux of extreme disinvolvement comically interrupted from time to time by a flapper who shuffled on and off stage for no apparent reason. The evening ended with a high-stepping and high-spirited *Cakewalk* (1940), performed in full evening dress.

The pieces that worked best were those that aimed simply to entertain—which is not so simple, considering the dearth of successful dance entertainment on today's stages. The vaudeville-style comedy of *Los Indios,* the car-

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icatures of *Flaming Youth,* the deadpan comic irony of the racial stereotypes in *Fieldhands*—all succeeded in fulfilling their modest ambitions. Those works with pretensions to dramatic or religious significance, however, were less successful, despite the performers' conviction, or perhaps because of it. Contemporary accounts suggest that Dunham maintained a theatrical detachment from her material, which is very different from the almost frightening realism of April Berry's trance dance in *L'Ag'ya* and Dereque Whiturs's in *Shango.* One wonders if the dancers have even been encouraged in this realistic approach, perhaps in an effort to emphasize Dunham's claim to stature as a serious dance artist, perhaps as a result of a deepening of her religious beliefs (she has been initiated as a Haitian voodoo cult priestess). Whatever the reason, the results are problematic.

The Joffrey Ballet's reconstruction last October of Vaslav Nijinsky's original choreography for *Le Sacre du printemps* gave us a glimpse of the possibility of conveying the emotion of primitive ritual in abstract dance terms. Bronislava Nijinska's *Les Noces* provides another example—a point that Denby makes in his review. Dunham had neither the talents of a West Indian Stravinsky to call upon nor the Russian choreographers' grasp of dance abstraction. What she did have was a highly developed sense of theater, which is rare enough in itself to justify the considerable effort and expense that went into the production of *The Magic of Katherine Dunham.* (The lavish costumes and scenery were meticulously reconstructed after the originals by John Pratt, Dunham's late husband.) Only recently have we begun to appreciate the rich heritage of our dancing that was created for the commercial stage, which is in grave danger of disappearing without a trace: Jerome Robbins has recently announced his intention of reconstructing some of his Broadway dances.

After nearly a quarter century of neglect it is perhaps understandable that Dunham should wish to legitimize as high art what in its time was unabashedly entertainment and unashamedly commercial fare. But in striving to pass off her "numbers" as something other than they are, Dunham actually diminishes her achievement, which was real and considerable. After all, when was the last time New Yorkers were treated to an entire evening of entertaining show dancing?

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Hugh Kenner: a sinking oeuvre

by Bruce Bawer

Book by book, Hugh Kenner has become one of the Big Names. The list of previous works facing the half-title of his newest critical study, *A Sinking Island,*[1] falls only a line or two short of overflowing the page; it contains the names of no fewer than twenty-one books published over the past forty years, from *Paradox in Chesterton* (1948) to *The Mechanical Muse* (1987). Among these, as his author's note proudly indicates, are "two [books] on Ezra Pound, three on Joyce, two on Beckett, and one on T. S. Eliot." In fact, though a few of his works venture beyond the territory defined by these famous names —witness the titles *Geodesic Math and How to Use It* and *Bucky: A Guided Tour of Buckminster Fuller*—the bulk of Kenner's oeuvre concerns itself with the modernist movement in literature. The back cover of the paperback edition of his most famous and highly praised tome, *The Pound Era* (1971), quotes a *New York Times* reviewer's remark that "Kenner's 'The Pound Era' could as well be known as the Kenner era, for there is no critic who has more firmly established his claim to valuable literary property than has Kenner to the first three decades of the twentieth century in England."

The Pound Era is indeed an admirable contribution to literary study. Though as boisterously fragmentary in its form as *The Cantos* themselves, it is a cogent and energetic history of literary modernism that reads as if it were written by someone who himself participated in the tumultuous events described in its pages. The book's principal flaw is that it distorts the picture of literary modernism by focusing strongly on the personality and beliefs of Ezra Pound, and by devoting more attention to such relatively minor Pound intimates as Wyndham Lewis and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska than to other, larger figures. Yet it is an important book, and—though it should be read in conjunction with studies by other critics with different views and emphases—it represents a valuable contribution to the history of modernism. Given the fact that Kenner had already taken on, in previous books, the careers of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Wyndham Lewis, the judgment that with *The Pound Era* he staked something of a claim to the territory of literary modernism is not quite as hyperbolic as one might suppose.

The problem with staking critical claims, however, is that if you don't keep working the land in question, you forfeit your rights to it. And the problem with working the land, in turn, is that if you work it *too* long without rotating crops and allowing the soil to lie fallow occasionally, you'll wear it out. This, alas, has been Kenner's trouble. For in the seventeen years since *The Pound Era,* he has returned time and again to the subject of modern literature, each time saying pretty much the same things about the same handful of writers. Another critic in the same

1 *A Sinking Island,* by Hugh Kenner; Knopf, 304 pages, $19.95.

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position might have divided his property into small sectors, and in each new book tilled another field in its turn; to be sure, Kenner did revert to this smaller-scale approach in *Joyce's Voices* (1978) and *Ulysses* (1982). But for the most part he has not been satisfied, since the early Seventies, to take on anything less than the Big Picture; in one book after another, his subject has been nothing less ambitious than Literary Modernism itself. Since he has not found much that is new to say about his pet subject, however (or, for that matter, found new ways to say the same old things), the landgrave of modernism has had to satisfy himself instead with moving from window to window in his manor house, continually looking down upon his property with the same eyes—though each time viewing it from a somewhat different vantage point, so that in every book a different set of figures occupies the foreground.

Which brings us to *A Sinking Island.* Kenner presents his new book as the third volume of a trilogy on the "three provinces of literary modernism." In the first volume, *A Homemade World* (1975), he looked at America, in *A Colder Eye* (1983) at Ireland; *A Sinking Island* takes up the subject of literary modernism in England. But the apparent variation in topics is largely illusory. Kenner himself writes, in the early pages of his new book, that there can actually be no separation among modern American, Irish, and English literature; in the twentieth century, he argues, the distinct literatures of these three countries have given way to a single phenomenon called International Modernism, which "no national tradition can plausibly claim." To write sensibly about a modernist work like *The Waste Land,* in other words, one must recognize that its roots lie in both American and English literature, as well as in a novel by an Irishman named Joyce. If in *A Colder Eye,* say, Joyce and Yeats are among the most prominent figures, and in *A Homemade World* the emphasis is on Pound and Williams (among others), nonetheless in all three books the story remains essentially the same. Indeed, those who have read the earlier books in Kenner's trilogy—or, for that matter, *The Pound Era* or *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (1959) or *Wyndham Lewis* (1954) or *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (1951)—will recognize in *A Sinking Island* not only Kenner's trademark prejudices, but also many previously trotted-out anecdotes, jokes, ironies, and platitudes. (As in his Eliot book, for instance, he has fun listing half a dozen or so sentences that *The Egoist* quoted out of context from the *TLS* in order to make the Establishment seem ludicrous.) Those who, like Marianne Moore, have found Kenner "entertaining" may be reminded by *A Sinking Island* of an entertainer who is still using the same material after twenty years; those who, like Mark Schorer, have found him "stimulating" may discover fewer new stimuli here than they might wish to. Those who accept unquestioningly Kenner's version of modernism, however, may well respond to *A Sinking Island* in much the way that a Victorian parishioner responded to a revered minister's comfortable sermon upon a familiar text.

To draw such an analogy, of course, is to indulge in a little irony of the sort that Kenner himself is so fond of; for the last thing that Kenner would want to be taken for is a nineteenth-century cleric. On the contrary, one of the distinguishing marks of *A Sinking Island* is the fervor with which Kenner attacks those conventional types—not only Victorians but Edwardians and Georgians as well—who made the mistake of predating or opposing the modern movement in England. So thick is Kenner's sarcasm, so intense his apparent hostility, toward these bourgeois folk—whether writers, editors, or readers—that one would think Kenner had been in the trenches with Pound through the whole modernist revolution. Even more than in *The Pound Era,* his perspective and tone here are not those of an objective literary historian or even of a highly opinionated critic, writing half a century and more after the events he chronicles, but those of a modernist field soldier who is still embroiled in the cultural battles he describes.

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Taking as his starting point the year 1895—"a year distinguished by nothing in particular except its plenitude of happenings," such as the debuts of Conrad and Wells, the imprisonment of Wilde, the publication of the last novels of Meredith and Hardy, and the end of Yeats's early phase—Kenner proceeds to ridicule now-forgotten turn-of-the-century best-sellers, such as the novelist Marie Corelli, with the sort of heavy-handed irony that most critics can work up only over their contemporaries.

But Kenner's most stinging ironies are reserved for the long-dead reviewers and editors whom he calls "bookmen"—a word which, repeated endlessly in *A Sinking Island,* proves to be the book's chief term of vilification. For instance, Kenner devotes a section to the bookman J. M. Dent and his Everyman's Library, founded in 1906, a series whose selection of titles—a selection determined largely by the public-domain status of early Victorian writings—helped not only to shape the literary tastes of prewar middle-class Englishmen but to bequeath them a distorted view of the oeuvres of certain nineteenth-century writers. Of course, the middlebrow audience for the Everyman's Library was not the only reading public in turn-of-the-century England; there was also a "shifting and beleaguered 'highbrow' public" that would constitute the principal audience for the great modern writers, and there were the lowbrows who read magazines like *Tit-bits.* Kenner is concerned in *A Sinking Island* with retailing the stories of all three of these audiences, for, as he argues, it was not so much against the serious literature of an earlier generation, but against the lowbrow and middlebrow fodder that became shockingly plentiful at the turn of the century, that the modernist writers rebelled. Early in the book, accordingly, Kenner reprints an absurdly melodramatic story of love, sacrifice, and intrigue, "For Vera's Sake," that was written by one Philip Beaufoy and published in *Tit-bits* on May 1, 1897, and throughout the rest of the book Kenner uses this story—at times very effectively—as an example of everything to which Pound and his modernist cohorts set themselves in opposition.

Kenner is, needless to say, famous for his style—which, for better or worse, has become increasingly similar over the years to that of Ezra Pound. Compressed, busy, playful, irreverent, it is characterized by a frequent and often unorthodox use of italics, capital letters, punctuation marks, colloquialism, and slang, a fondness for proper names and bizarre anecdotes and exotic details; it eschews graceful Latinate language in favor of Anglo-Saxon angularity. Instead of "maternal grandfather," for instance, Kenner will say "mother's father"; he prefers the Anglo-Saxon *foreword* to the Latin *preface.* Kenner's taste for irony and sarcasm is also quite Poundian. ("Be assured that this book contains no ironies where none are intended," he tells us near the book's beginning.) Like Pound, too, Kenner wants above all to be *lively.* "The history of 'free verse,'" he observes, "seems to be unwritten; it's to be hoped the job won't be ventured by a dull dog." A dull dog: in Kenner's mind one could hardly be anything worse; his every sentence bespeaks a fear that somebody, somewhere, might mistake him for a specimen of that sorry breed. If Pound's motto was "make it new," one imagines Kenner glancing up every now and then from his word processor at a placard that reads "Make It Zippy." Though his criticism has frequently been lauded for its originality, more often than not the newness is not in the ideas but in the jazzy way Kenner expresses them.

At its best, to be sure, Kenner's prose is every bit as fresh, sharp, and vivid as he wants it to be. Consider the opening of the book, which is, like most of Kenner's openings, very engaging, full of strong nouns and verbs and colorful detail:

> "English," formerly "Anglisc," was the tongue of the Teuton "Angles" who invaded and then settled Northumbria and Mercia amid cries that the savages had come. Until recently it implied the culture of an island called En-

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> gland . . . . From the seventeenth century clear to the twentieth—from the Venerable Bede to Basil Bunting—its idioms have been inextricable from the fortunes of men on that island: from their climate, their customs, their history, their shifting rituals of self-esteem. A word like "hearth" accretes warmth from the island's damp cold nights. Likewise, "oak" takes sanction from pride in England's history, "ale" from immemorial English custom, "lad" from peculiarly English imprecisions of fellow-feeling . . . .

That's an arresting way to open a book; Kenner comes off not as a dry-as-dust scholar but as a storyteller with a new and bold and illuminating way of telling a favorite story. And in fact, the first few chapters of *A Sinking Island*—those that discuss the late nineteenth-century spread of literacy, the three reading publics at the turn of the century, and the beginnings of modern writing—move along with commendable vigor and panache; they are without question the most original and provocative part of the book.

Not that one necessarily buys Kenner's arguments. Take, for instance, his remarks on Oscar Wilde. Kenner considers the imprisonment of Wilde even more crucial to literary history than do other critics; as an indication of how crushing a blow middlebrow morality—and that relatively new phenomenon, the popular press—had dealt to highbrow literary art, he cites the prediction of Wilde's contemporary Dr. Richard Garnett that English poetry would suffer a sort of "death . . . for fifty years" as a result of Wilde's imprisonment. Kenner suggests that T. S. Eliot's insistence upon the impersonality of the poet was a consequence of the lingering anxiety of highbrow English literary folk over the Wilde verdict; "in 1919," he argues, "Eliot saw no other possible way to free talk about Art in England from confusion still potent after a quarter-century." Certainly this is a most fascinating way of accounting for the genesis of a crucial modernist tenet. But Kenner's argument seems a bit shaky when one considers that during the Wilde trial Eliot was a schoolboy in St. Louis, and that Eliot's theory of impersonality may be traced to the philosophies of Rémy de Gourmont and F. H. Bradley, which he first came across at Harvard. (Indeed, the critic Ronald Bush considers Eliot's theory of impersonality to be characteristic of his "best New England manner.")

Kenner also accords H. G. Wells unusual importance in the modernist scheme. Rather convincingly, he argues that *The Time Machine*—which Henry James loved, and which *The New Review* serialized, as it did *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *What Maisie Knew*—was a major forerunner of literary modernism in England. "[B]eneath 'scientific' trappings," he writes, "*The Time Machine* was a fable of the England H. G. Wells knew, restoring a genre of imaginative writing in which a seeming portrayal of the remote discloses the here and now, through its glass, and darkly." Wells's portrayal of the year 802,701—in which a seemingly happy people known as the Eloi live in Arcadian splendor, indifferent to the fact that the subterranean-dwelling Morlocks are using them as "succulent edible cattle"—is to Kenner an allegorical representation of London in 1895, the first of many twentieth-century English works (e.g., *The Waste Land, Brave New World, 1984, A Clockwork Orange*) in which an imagined London became an "emblem of sickness beyond remedy." But the most immediate influence of *The Time Machine,* in Kenner's view, was upon "Heart of Darkness," written only four years later. Like Wells's novel, Conrad's story—which, Kenner reminds us, "was not meant for 'aesthetic' segregation" but "first appeared as a three-part serial in *Blackwood's Magazine*"—tells, by means of a tale-within-a-tale structure, of a "fantastic voyage" from London (where the tale is being told) to the cannibalistic "heart of an immense darkness." Kenner suggests that it was largely through Conrad—whose style was held up as a modernist model by Pound and Ford Madox Ford, and widely imitated—that the "scenic, crisp" narrative procedures of *The Time Machine* became

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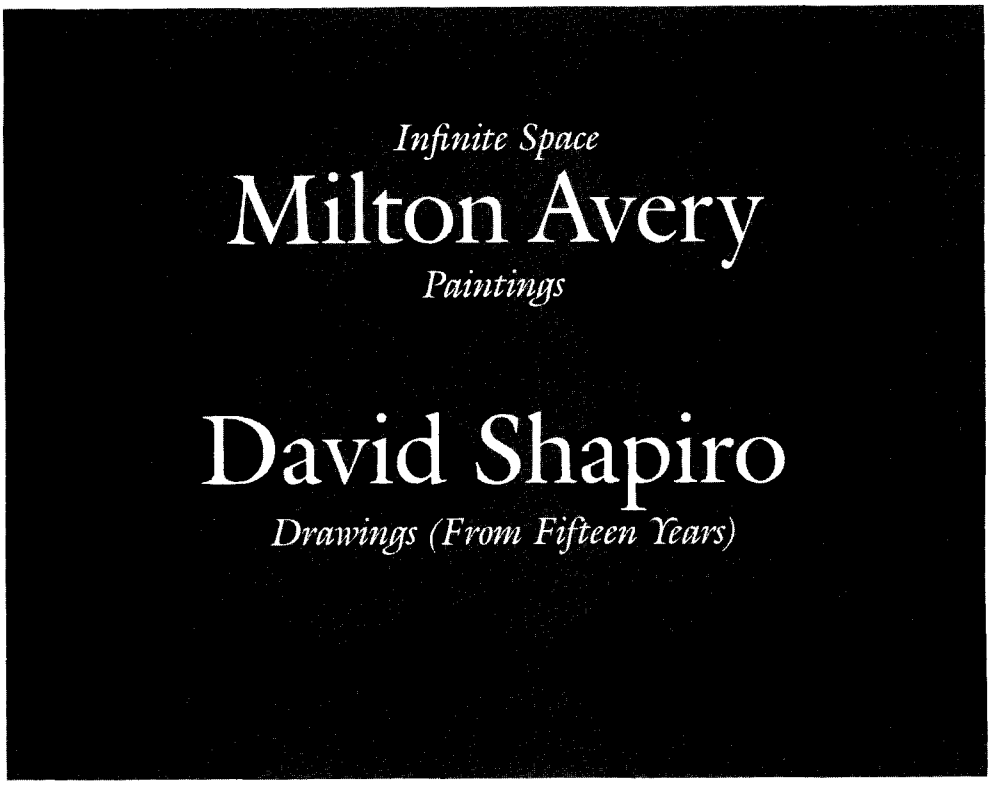

dispersed into twentieth-century English poetry and fiction.

If Kenner raises Wells, he lowers Wells's contemporary Henry James. In Kenner's view, James and Samuel Beckett

> are our virtuosi of the dead end, playing there each man hand after hand of his own intent necessary solitaire, intricate in its quasi-colloquial abstractions, minimal in its referentiality, inauthentic for anyone else to attempt. [James's] etiolation, yes, Virginia Woolf would inherit, for the playing of her own variations, and she's had no descendants either. As for H. G. Wells, his inheritors are too numerous to contemplate or to examine: write in any names sufficiently audible and you'll not be wrong. Don't forget the BBC.

Granted, there is some truth here. But to pretend that the only line of early modern influence in the matter of "scenic, crisp" prose ran through Wells and Conrad is absurd (what, to mention a single name, about Flaubert?). Even more absurd is the notion that the lack of modern and contemporary imitators of Henry James's style means that the Master has had no influence; much to the contrary, the fact is that James is very largely responsible for bringing psychological complexity and subtlety, ambiguity and objectivity, into twentieth-century literature. That Kenner should deny this fact is peculiar, because the first few pages of *The Pound Era* are devoted to a detailed discussion of James's influences upon the later modernists. Quoting from "Homage to Sextus Propertius," for instance, Kenner writes in *The Pound Era* that Pound's lines, "applying devices learned from James, locate their subject in a mode of thought habitual with him: the steady generosity of response to things happening . . . . The *Homage to Sextus Propertius* was achieved by a mind filled with James's prose." Kenner acknowledges that James's sensibility too had its lasting effects: "James knew much of spirits, James celebrated rituals, James's great sensibility brought in a generation. But for that sensibility *Prufrock* is unthinkable, *Mauberley* and

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The Cantos are unthinkable." How can Kenner reconcile such observations with his remarks about James in *A Sinking Island*?

Kenner is better on Eliot: "He was a prose writer in all his intuitions. He thought in passages of speech, blocked out. The effects he cherished required time in which to take hold." And he is splendid on the snobbish ethos of Bloomsbury, which exalted the connoisseur to a higher level than the artist himself. But he has little interest in writers who do not evince what he considers "natural diction." He quotes E. M. Forster, for instance, only for purposes of ridicule (incredibly, he seems to think that Forster's prose bears resemblance to that of the *Tit-bits* hack Philip Beaufoy). Likewise, he puts down Katherine Mansfield and brands her admirers a "cult," but never examines so much as a word of her fiction; instead he quotes a few familiar one-liners on her work by D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and Middleton Murray. And his tirelessly patronizing attitude toward early twentieth-century "bookmen" is offensive. Though he complains that "[t]o eradicate the distinctions by which one mind is known from another . . . was the bookman's paid task," he himself paints all "bookmen" with the same brush, ignoring the distinctions that must inevitably have existed among them.

As the book wears on, moreover, Kenner's prose seems increasingly mannered, tiresome, even irritating, a collection of gratuitous and self-conscious stylistic tics. Here, for example, is a sentence—taken from a passage in the chapter called "Armageddon"—that typifies his style:

> That year [1905] the electric lines first ventured north of the Thames, to commence obsolescing the horses Europeans had relied on since Troy's time.

Not "the time of Troy," mind you, but "Troy's time": to Kenner the phrase's clumsiness is apparently less important than its zing, especially when it comes after the slightly tongue-in-cheek "commence obsolescing." (Stylistically akin to "commence obsolescing" is Kenner's coy reference, later in the book, to "Guy Burgess and Donald MacLean and like transcensions of the bourgeoisified.") Here's another sentence from the same passage:

> After caterpillar treads eventually conquered much, there was no place mechanized vehicles couldn't go.

"Conquered much" may sound awkward to you and me, but to Kenner, one gathers, this is taut, hard, natural writing, like Pound's "Canto I" ("And then went down to the ship . . ."). A third sentence, still the same passage:

> Pre-war too, people still spoke in Homer's way, face to face.

"Pre-war," of course, is an adverb here, not an adjective; Kenner uses it in this unusual, distracting way several times over the course of half a dozen or so pages.

One of Kenner's favorite means of emphasizing a word is to repeat it immediately. Page 151: "The Georgian Anthologies sold well and kept selling, reprinted, reprinted." Though this strategy is effective when employed once or twice, after one has seen it a few dozen times it seems merely crude. Page 153, after cutely transcribing a sentence from Arthur Waugh as if it were a Rupert Brooke quatrain: "Wait, wait, I've miscopied; reprint that last sentence as prose . . . ." Page 158, in reference to the literary circles of 1920s London: "The gangs, the gangs." Likewise, he begins Chapter Eleven: "Science, oh dear, science." And he leans heavily on the words "yes" and "no." Take his otherwise largely impressive Bloomsbury chapter, for instance, in which he writes that, in order to flourish as a writer in 1920s London, one could not simply set up shop on Fleet Street: "No, you needed your own village, your own funds, your own printing-press." Thus the central position of the Woolfs and their Hogarth Press. "Virginia, yes, had rare talent." But her essays are overrated: "No, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown'

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will not serve as a serious criticism of Arnold Bennett." And whom is she talking about when she refers in that essay to the "Georgian novelists"? None other than "Lawrence and Joyce, yes indeed, and of course Woolf." And is *The Waves* any good? "No, *The Waves,* we know from the start, is a Bloomsbury self-congratulation, unreal from end to end, voice after voice finely straining after fineness of perception." And is *To the Lighthouse* any better? "No, our author can't really be bothered to imagine."

So it goes. After leaving behind the "brave beginnings" of the 1920s, Kenner appears to lose interest, and sometimes even to lose his way. Chapter 12, entitled "A Dishonest Decade," begins on an offhand, rather tired note:

> And so to the "thirties." Aldous Huxley had come and not gone, and now there was Auden: Auden, perpetually "promising," till the day he died. Still, it was a grim decade. "A low dishonest decade" he called it, didn't he? It opened in fiscal doldrums and closed with the island yet again at war.

The chapter—and indeed the book—meanders along from there on, pausing every now and then for brief, bored, superficial glances at various writers, never quite finding a center. One gets the feeling that Kenner has already had his say about the things that provoke him and that these latter chapters represent a half-hearted attempt to fill out an obligatory outline. Kenner's stylistic tics are more and more in evidence. Watch Kenner jabber away, for example, about Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*:

> And London? London is busy Mrs. Beaver, and Bratt's Club, and a dive called The Old Hundredth, and that's all.
>
> *Heart of Darkness,* thinned and lightened? Yes. And freed of rhetorical excess, and made into a popular novel for the mid-thirties. Not a great novel, no . . . . A low dishonest decade? A cartoon decade . . . .
>
> Todd, though. True, there's little of Todd, a few pages, but Todd—Tony Last's undying Mr. Kurtz—Todd does have, and alone has, a monstrous (passive) energy. For Todd *cares* . . . .

And on it clatters. At its best, Kenner's prose manages to clarify difficult matters for the reader; the sort of prose he typically doles out in the latter part of the book, however, does not make things easier for anyone except Kenner.

And his criticism, in these later chapters, is often as cursory as his prose. The plain fact is that Kenner doesn't like most postwar English writers; but he's apparently not about to trouble himself to figure out exactly *why* he doesn't like them. Instead, his method is to hurl random, inconsistent, and irrelevant slurs that would never hold up in a freshman class in literary analysis and argumentation. Take his section on Dylan Thomas, whose poetry he denigrates because it "took no account at all of the public world and what had been happening to it" and because he "seemed not to notice" the "machine-world." Kenner quotes "Fern Hill" (one of the most beautiful poems of the twentieth century) only to complain that the poem is dishonest—not truly felt but phony and literary—because Thomas grew up not in the countryside, where the boyhood idyll is set, but in

> urban Anglicized Swansea, son of a secondary-school Eng. Lit. teacher who read to him. His own list of writers he imitated includes "Sir Thomas Browne, de Quincey, Henry Newbolt, the Ballads, Blake, Baroness Orczy, Marlowe, Chums, the Imagists, the Bible, Poe, Keats, Lawrence, Anon; and Shakespeare." So in "Fern Hill" the green, the boughs, the barley are fetched from literature—from *Georgian* literature, come to think of it—and fetched into such a palace of naive Art as Brooke might have erected . . . .

"So" indeed! Kenner's implication of a cause-and-effect relationship here is utterly unfounded. It is not "Fern Hill" but Kenner's complaint about it that is dishonest; for as

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Kenner must know, Thomas in his childhood spent many summer vacations at the remote farm known as Fern Hill, which the poet's biographer Constantine Fitzgibbon describes as "the most important place in his childhood." Does Kenner need to be told that, for many an adult, the most blissful memories of childhood are associated with a beloved setting that was not necessarily one's principal residence at the time?

Nor is there any justification for Kenner's implication that "Fern Hill" is derivative; for it doesn't sound especially imitative of Browne, de Quincey, or anyone on that list. (Why is imitation, by the way, admirable in Pound and Eliot but not in Thomas?) Kenner compares Thomas unfavorably to D. H. Lawrence, complaining that the apple boughs and green grass of "Fern Hill" don't have "the particularity of a datable and threatened landscape" that the Brangwen farm had for Lawrence. True—but so what? That an important critic could mistake such a question for a criterion of poetic value is disturbing. How datable and particular, after all, is the landscape in Wallace Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West"? Kenner implies that Lawrence is a better writer than Thomas because in Lawrence's work the gaiety of youth is dispelled by "railways and coal," whereas in "Fern Hill" that gaiety departs simply because "we must all grow up, 'And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.'" It seems to me that, if one were forced to compare these two writers on such fatuous grounds, the result would be a determination that Thomas, being the more universal writer, is therefore the more valuable one. Kenner also makes fun of Thomas's use of *Roget's Thesaurus*; what, one wonders, does he make of the fact that Wallace Stevens referred to his dictionary constantly in the course of composing his poems? Finally, Kenner remarks with amusement that the library copy from which he quotes Thomas's poetry has been scrawled in by a lover of "Fern Hill": "Go ahead, find a better poem, go ahead. Impossible." What is worth noting here is not the scrawl but the fact that Kenner had to take a book out of the library in order to read "Fern Hill"; perhaps if he kept such poetry as close at hand as he undoubtedly does that of Ezra Pound he might someday—who knows?—grow to appreciate it as much as he does, say, the *Usura* cantos.

After taking his potshots at Thomas, Kenner proceeds to the next generation of English writers. "Bloomsbury was virtually extinct, that was something, and in the postwar decades anarchic energies were there to draw applause. Yes, yes, Amis; yes, yes, John Osborne; later yes, yes, *Private Eye*." About none of these names does Kenner have anything more to say. He does, however, pause to sneer a bit over the corpse of Philip Larkin, whom he praises grudgingly for his grim evocations of postwar English life but harasses mercilessly for his philistinism. That neither the grimness of Larkin's evocations nor his philistinism has anything to do with the literary value of his poetry seems unimportant to Kenner; he's more interested in belittling the poet in order to make a point: "In Philip Larkin we behold perhaps the first British man of letters of notable gifts for whom easy books, and only easy books, were the human mind's natural secretions."

"Easy books"? Kenner explains that, the assumptions of a philistine like Larkin to the contrary, great literature was *always* difficult, long before *Finnegans Wake* and *The Waste Land*. "Milton had assumed, and so had Dante, that what was *expected* of a poet was a work of learning, something to occupy readers all their lives"; "easy books," he argues, only came into being with the eighteenth-century rise of literacy among the *hoi polloi*. But throughout history there have been great writers—Chaucer, Shakespeare—who wrote not for scholars but for the multitudes. Plainly, Kenner's equation between the *hard* book, the *highbrow* book, and the *great* book, on the one hand, and between the *easy* book, the *middlebrow* book, and the *mediocre* book on the other, is disturbingly facile. Certainly these are six distinct concepts; that Kenner is capable of implying otherwise may well help to explain his con-

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descending attitude not only toward Larkin but toward such other important but relatively "easy" writers as Katherine Mansfield and E. M. Forster.

It may also help to explain Kenner's declaration, in the book's last chapter, that "there's no longer an English Literature." Not that talent has been lacking, "not at all; but, a center absent, talent collects for itself the materials of some unique cosmos." What does this mean, other than that Ezra Pound is dead and no longer giving orders? In the world according to Kenner, apparently, writers have to work in the same city and share the same aesthetic program for "literature" to exist. Ironically, Kenner goes on to criticize the literary movers and shakers in contemporary London for engaging in the same sort of literary politicking that he has celebrated Pound for having practiced three quarters of a century ago. Admittedly, the sort of poetry-scene log-rolling Kenner describes is unfortunate, but to dwell upon such matters is hardly the same thing as perpetrating literary criticism. Besides, after deploring the way that contemporary English poet-friends help to push each other's careers, Kenner spends half a dozen pages (the most space he devotes to any single writer in the chapters on postwar writing) eulogizing his late friend Basil Bunting, to whose memory the book is dedicated and whose poetry he places far above that of any of his contemporaries.

To read the last chapter of this book is to see Kenner at his least impressive. Amazingly condescending and superficial, he dismisses the oeuvre of one major contemporary writer after another with the greatest of ease—which is to say that, whether one agrees with his individual judgments or not, he doesn't support most of these judgments in any consistent or sensible manner. His offhand style and idiosyncratic method—which, when he is at his finest, make possible the intelligible and entertaining expression of complex facts and ideas—make it easier for Kenner, when he is at his weakest, to get away with obnoxious name-calling and supercilious put-downs. Quite frequently, when he does invoke explicit criteria for literary greatness, they are dubious ones: impenetrability, "relevance," newness for its own sake. Though Kenner devotes considerable attention to style, furthermore, he seems all too frequently to prize writers whose chief stylistic contribution to twentieth-century literature has been a cold, severe hardness. Anything that might be described as "beautiful" or "lovely" or "graceful" writing plainly bothers Kenner. To him the eloquence of a Dylan Thomas and the insipidity of a Philip Beaufoy are essentially of a piece; a pure, intense aesthetic response of the sort experienced by the anonymous vandal who wrote in that library book of Thomas's poems seems beyond him. Ultimately, the fact that Ezra Pound looms so terribly large in his picture of the modern scene, and such figures as James, Flaubert, Stevens, Proust, and even Eliot are so much smaller, is enough to give any intelligent reader a fair notion of the main deficiencies of Hugh Kenner's critique of modernism.

Live, from SoHo

Elizabeth Avedon, editor The Vintage Contemporary Artists series

reviewed by Deborah Solomon

In an age when artists are regularly accorded the level of celebrityhood once reserved for movie stars, more attention than ever is being focused on their personal lives. It's peculiar to think that we know so little about the life of Titian that we can't even vouch for the year he was born (was it 1487 or 1490?), but that every student of modern art is so fully acquainted with the life of Picasso that he can readily recite not just the artist's dates, but those of his wives and many lovers. For some time now, the assumption has been that an artist's life is not irrelevant; perhaps it can enhance our understanding of the work. Yet the notion that an artist is more important than his

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work, that his life is of interest *regardless* of his work—this is a recent development and one which serves as the guiding principle behind a new series of books on David Salle, Eric Fischl, Robert Rauschenberg, and Francisco Clemente.[1]

The first four books in the Vintage Contemporary Artists series, as it is officially known, are slim paperbacks priced at about ten dollars and conceived for the stated purpose of making art books available to people who can't usually afford them. But nowhere in their pages is the reader offered the traditional rewards one expects of an art book, such as the chance to look at dozens of reproductions or to mull over an insightful essay. The books consist of interviews with the artists, glib, breezy discourses in which little of substance is said. Brief introductions are also supplied, but the critics who wrote them seem far less interested in analyzing art than in advertising their connection to it. Barbara Rose, the author of the Rauschenberg book, begins her essay with the grand pronouncement, "We have not seen each other for years, but we are very old friends." The Vintage series presents us with the spectacle of leading critics reduced to talk-show hosts and of artists grabbing for the mike. Live, from SoHo, it's Salle and Fischl and their pals.

There is nothing implicitly wrong, of course, with artists discussing their life or work, with critics asking them questions, with readers taking an interest in anecdotes and details that offer the illusion of intimacy with art. Interviews with artists are by now a staple of the magazine industry, and it would be boorish not to admit that they are occasionally fun to read. Yet when a publisher takes a magazine-style interview, slaps it between book covers, and presents it to the public as a bona fide art book—and as a bargain, no less, intended expressly for students and others on a tight budget—this is a case of marketing savvy masquerading as cultural munificence, and is all the more offensive because it is a sham.

Although the publisher has stinted on color reproductions—there are only four per book—no expense has been spared in packaging the books. The artists are interviewed by big-name critics, such as Rose, Peter Schjeldahl, and Donald Kuspit. They've been photographed for the cover by Richard Avedon. Even the books' editor is a luminary, or so she would have us believe. As we learn on the title page of each of the four volumes in tall, bold print, these are none other than "Elizabeth Avedon Editions"—she's the daughter-in-law of the photographer and a free-lance designer by profession. Such unabashed name-flaunting seems entirely consistent with the self-promoting spirit in which the project was conceived. These are books meant to celebrate celebrity.

It seems worth stating at the outset that three of the first four artists to be featured in the series—Salle, Fischl, and Clemente—are under forty and immensely popular, and owe their success to the theatrical nature of their subject matter. It doesn't require any sophistication to understand their paintings, which, like the Vintage books, offer quick, easy contact with sensation-making figures. As for the curious inclusion of Rauschenberg, who hasn't done much notable work lately, one imagines the publisher is testing the market appeal of an older artist against the guaranteed draw of art-world trendlings.

So what do these artists have to say, anyway? Of the four books, surely the most provocative is *Salle* by Peter Schjeldahl. (All of the books in the series are titled after the artist's last name only, inadvertently reducing them to trademarks.) Salle is interesting because he sees himself as a spokesman for his generation and is eager to set the record straight. Two pages into the interview, he claims to give us the *real* story about the mid-Seventies, about how the art world was paralyzed by a kind of workers' shutdown. "This is something," Salle explains, "that no one would ever come out and say, but I

1 The four books, all published in paperback by Vintage Books, are *Salle,* by Peter Schjeldahl, *Fischl,* by Donald Kuspit, and *Clemente,* by Rainer Crone and Georgia Marsh, at $9.95, and *Rauschenberg,* by Barbara Rose, at $10.95.

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remember many people who had really, although they had studios and called themselves painters and held academic posts in painting, functionally stopped working. I remember paintings staying in people's studios—when they said they were working on them—for months and months, not much happening."

Salle doesn't specify exactly who had stopped working, but perhaps the details are irrelevant. What Salle is trying to get across, here and elsewhere in the interview, is that he arrived in New York at a time when artists had lost all sense of direction and needed a leader to point the way. That leader, of course, was himself. Salle, who regularly uses words like "linkage" and "metonymy," and who likens his work to the novels of Peter Handke, obviously thinks of himself as a brainy, bookish guy. Yet he uses his knowledge to promote such a self-aggrandizing view of history—one that begins with his messianic arrival on the blacked-out stage of the Seventies—that it's hard to take his comments as anything but fantasy and pretense.

On the subject of his own work, Salle is evasive. When Schjeldahl tries to draw him out on the "really shocking" nature of so much contemporary art, he's not the least bit interested in discussing the cynical renditions of female anatomy that have won him so much attention. "The point about the poses in my work," he says, "is that they are the body in extremes—often seen from strange points of view and spatial orientation. It has more to do with the poetics of abstract choreography and angles of vision than with pornographic narrative." Yawn. Salle's work is intended to appall, and his refusal to admit it is tiresome.

Fischl, by comparison, is far less affected. He has no interest in constructing elaborate mythologies, and seems to feel somewhat ashamed of collaborating on a project of such obvious inconsequence as the Vintage series. But then shame is Fischl's bread and butter, as anyone who has seen his naughty figure paintings knows. "There are many things," he says, "that are more interesting and fun to do than [paint] . . . . It's more fun to be photographed by famous photographers or to accept a titillating offer. It's more exciting to be interviewed by famous critics and to have books made about you . . . . It's very hard to shut the social out. You have to be very disciplined. You have to want the art you make to be taken more seriously than you are." Fischl feels uneasy about the attention he's receiving, but not enough to turn it away.

Kuspit, in his interview with the artist, makes every effort to place Fischl's work in a psychoanalytic framework. His speech is cluttered with all sorts of jargon, such as "object relations" and "interpersonality," and he customarily engages in such banalities as asking the artist whether his "attitude to his mother and father" is reflected in his work. One is almost moved to gratitude when Fischl puts a stop to this execrable line of inquiry by saying that he has never read Freud and prefers to think of his work in a larger context.

Rauschenberg, too, is an artist of few pretensions. His interview with Barbara Rose, the longest and most anecdotal in the Vintage series, at times makes for entertaining reading. Only a misanthrope could fail to smile at Rauschenberg's various adolescent escapades. Once, during his student days at the University of Texas, he walked into an anatomy class and was startled to realize that a frog had been placed on every desk for the purpose of dissection. "I thought, Couldn't we just dissect one frog for all of us? Or couldn't we just look at pictures instead? I was supposed to go see the dean. On my way to see him, I opened the window and threw my frog out. That did it. I was expelled."

But Rauschenberg's charm quickly wears thin. When he starts recounting his visits to an astrologer and blithely reports that the reason he moved from New York City to Captiva, Florida was that five of his "most troublesome stars" were in conjunction with one another—this is insipid stuff, and it makes one yearn for the Forties and Fifties,

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when artists didn't grant interviews and talk was regarded as antithetical to art. Jackson Pollock, asked in 1943 to provide a statement about his painting *The She-Wolf,* bluntly replied, "Any attempt on my part to say something about it, to attempt explanation of the inexplicable, could only destroy it." Despite its edge of melodrama, Pollock's famous comment does reflect a genuine reluctance among artists of his generation to publicly discuss their work or their life.

Nowadays, by comparison, artists tell all. But to what end? When Rose asks Rauschenberg about his critical decision to abandon his early monochromatic paintings in favor of his "red paintings," he says in seriousness, "I have to use contradiction in my work not only to achieve something but to avoid something else . . . . It must go with my being a Libra cusp on Scorpio."

Rose is of little help in bringing Rauschenberg back to earth. While it quickly becomes evident that she admires his work and cherishes her long friendship with him, her comments are so mired in nostalgia for the years when Rauschenberg first emerged that she fails to communicate any real sense of why the period was interesting. "There were things going on all over!" she gushes to Rauschenberg at one point in the interview, though the only event she seems able to recall is a visit she once made to his studio with Rachel, her baby daughter. "Sweetie, your kinkajoo, jumped in her carriage and was about to bite her . . . . Anything could happen there. But basically it was safe . . . . The mood was family, and everyone looked out for everyone else." After a while, she sounds more like a grandma recalling the good old days than a critic intent on illuminating them.

Of all the interviews, the one with Clemente is by far the most tedious. The artist, who moved to New York from Italy in 1982 and sees himself as a poet *manqué,* never answers a question directly if he can come up with some dense abstraction instead. He is given to statements containing a minimum of information and a maximum of obfuscation. Asked to elaborate on his many self-portraits, Clemente explains, "There must be a necessity to the work. Some of the self-portraits have to do with that, because if we talk about experience, then we are talking about the commonplace. So what is the most immediate commonplace of all if not the body?" The more you think about it, the less sense it makes.

It should be pointed out that the Vintage books offer more than just interviews. They also include "selected" bibliographies, which are presumably intended to endow the books with an aura of scholarship. But the curious part about these so-called bibliographies is that they make no mention of books, monographs, exhibition catalogues, or other publications that could conceivably be of use. What we get instead are long lists of items culled from newspapers and magazines—a veritable hype report that serves no other purpose than to chronicle the publicity the artists have received and to celebrate the spirit of self-congratulation that makes a project such as the Vintage series possible. It is exceedingly unlikely that even the most diligent student of contemporary art might ever be moved to consult the 366 press items listed in the Salle bibliography—all of them appearing since just 1974—unless, that is, he were writing a paper on the media's role in creating the artist.

Finally, on the back cover of the Vintage books, the reader is treated to a color reproduction. Salle is represented by a pair of looming female buttocks rendered with characteristic crudeness, and Fischl gives us a middle-aged man caught in the act of masturbation. Rauschenberg offers a crumpled metal sculpture that's supposed to look like trash, and Clemente takes a bow with a histrionic image of two people of indeterminate sex locked together in misery. The works all clamor noisily for our attention, but the irony is that we can't see them in their entirety even if we want to. For in the lower right-hand corner of each book jacket is a blatant white rectangle measuring two inches long and an inch high, and bearing the marking ISBN as well as a series of

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numbers. It's a manufacturer's label, and it sloppily cuts into the paintings. Never before has commerce so literally intruded on art.

Call it irresponsible

Henry Roth Shifting Landscape. Jewish Publication Society, 301 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Donna Rifkind

Strange things happen every day in the world of publishing, but perhaps the longest strange story to emerge from within its clotted depths is that of Henry Roth. It is like a tale from Borges's Library of Babel: a writer, the son of Polish Jewish immigrants, composes a novel about his childhood in a Lower East Side slum. Upon publication in 1934, the book, *Call It Sleep,* is ignored, its publisher goes bankrupt, the author turns to other work as a toolmaker, a blueberry picker, a mental hospital attendant, a waterfowl farmer. In 1956, in a symposium in *The American Scholar, Call It Sleep* is hailed by Leslie Fiedler and Alfred Kazin as one of the "Most Neglected Books of the Last Twenty-five Years." A revival of sorts begins; a paperback edition is published in 1964 and sells a million copies. Total apathy toward the book careens at this time toward passionate interest in it—and in the author, around whom a weird little cult gathers to celebrate what is now perhaps the most famous case of writer's block in recent history.

Then, in 1985, when the author is nearly eighty, *Call It Sleep* wins the Premio Nonino, Italy's prestigious literary prize, for the year's best foreign novel. The author is mobbed by press and paparazzi when he goes to accept the award. The book's translator, Mario Materassi, a professor of American literature in Florence and a Henry Roth groupie, urges the author to let him publish a book of Roth's writings since *Call It Sleep.* A small problem is that, except for a few stories and some fragments of memoir, no such writings exist. This does not appear to trouble Materassi. And so a failed Jewish writer's literary shrapnel is scraped together by an overkeen Italian academic and reshaped into an unmistakable bomb called *Shifting Landscape: A Composite, 1925-1987.* It is a book composed entirely of false starts, notes, scribbles, second-rate stories, transcribed interviews, endless explanations of and meditations on writer's block—everything, in short, except actual literary achievement. One would be moved to laugh at this bizarre enterprise were it not for the fact that the victim of this fraud, Henry Roth, is a figure worthy of respect, and his misfortunes are not funny.

There are of course all kinds of reasons why writers write, and just as many reasons why they do not. Henry Roth's reasons for not writing seem to be tied up in a perfectionism so exacting that he has rationalized his way—very painfully, it seems—out of every attempt to produce a second book. *Shifting Landscape* is full of protests by Roth that "Marxism or Communism fell like a giant shunt across [my] career," that "a whole generation of writers who came of age in the thirties," of which Roth feels himself a part, "suddenly, after a brief spurt of creativity, lost identity, lost certainty, lost faith, lost bearings." No doubt there is truth in these protests, and they are all poignant. It is not our business to judge Henry Roth for a lifetime of struggling with artistic creation. What can be judged, however, are the machinations of those people who seem to have forced Roth into producing material about why he has been unable to produce material, and these machinations are everywhere evident throughout *Shifting Landscape.*

It should be emphasized that there is nothing in the least dishonorable about producing one good book—and *Call It Sleep* is without question a good book. (One could name plenty of writers who should have stopped, like Roth, after their first efforts.) The novel is so good that, had Roth died after writing it or disappeared without ever again scribbling so much as a laundry list, we should be grateful for it. True, the novel is wildly overwritten, full of self-

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consciously Joycean descriptive passages; but it is thoroughly alive; its emotions are genuine; it *works*. It tells the story of David Schearl, a Jewish boy growing up in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn and in lower Manhattan in the late Teens, in a highly introspective stream-of-consciousness style. Many books with the same environment as *Call It Sleep* are as effective in rendering the Jewish ghetto's bustle and din and sharp-smelling poverty, but there are few novels able to capture as fully as Roth's does the narrow terrors of a slum childhood, the effect that a greenhorn father's inarticulate fury and a mother's crushing protectiveness can have on a boy of ten. Everything in *Call It Sleep*—its close details, its characters' coarse Yiddish curses, even its overwriting—contributes to this extremely moving evocation. Because it is so deeply felt by its author, the book's audience feels its power equally deeply.

If Roth had strong feelings about *Call It Sleep,* his attitude toward *Shifting Landscape* is noticeably tepid; in fact, in his foreword, he expresses his reluctance about the project from the outset: "I saw no reason," he writes sensibly, "why I should publish a bunch of random pieces of various literary value, and some with no pretense to it at all." But then, he claims, Mario Materassi's purpose in publishing the book became clear to him; it was "nothing less really than to exhibit the continuity within the desolating discontinuity of the frustrated writer's existence—and to show the development that had taken place over all those barren years."

Now, this explanation may seem clear to Roth, but it is murky as a swamp bottom to me, since I find it hard to understand how development can occur in a writing career that has not happened. *Shifting Landscape,* which comprises Roth's total output after *Call It Sleep,* contains half a dozen complete short stories (previously published in magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*); the rest of the book consists of published and unpublished interviews, a few brief statements and addresses (on writer's block, on Israel and Roth's politics, on his rejection of a Jewish identity in favor of assimilation, on his receiving the Premio Nonino), fragments of stories, novels, and memoirs (some less than a page long), a poem, an appraisal of a playwright named Lynn Riggs, and an article on farm equipment for a trade periodical called *The Magazine for Ducks and Geese.* I must confess that, with the exception of the last-mentioned article, I found nothing in the book that approaches a fully formed, coherent, satisfactory piece of writing. A few of the stories, like "Petey and Yotsee and Mario" and "Many Mansions," have childhood themes that read like reworkings of parts of *Call It Sleep.* Others, like "The Surveyor" and "Final Dwarf," have adult preoccupations but never seem fully to materialize. Everything in the "composite" reads like a shattered fragment from the whole book of Roth's life, but the fragments don't fit together, and too many other parts are missing. And while Roth says he is now working on an extended memoir-novel called *Mercy of a Rude Stream,* he is past eighty years of age, and it is uncertain whether he will manage to finish.

Unlike many modern tragedies, in the sad story of Henry Roth there is a villain. The villain is called perversity, and it thrives in too many eager hangers-on of the literary world who pant for some literature to publish—who will go so far as to create an oeuvre for an author where one has never existed. The effort to publish *Call It Sleep* was a noble and gratifying one on the part of Roth; Materassi's idea to publish *Shifting Landscape* is an irresponsible and insulting one. On Roth's behalf, we can only hope that this recent injustice may be buried under due praise for his first and only novel, and that he may be, as the Judaism which he has abandoned dictates, inscribed in the Book of Life.

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Notebook

An evening at the University of the Arts

by Theodore Prescott

Several years ago I asked a friend, a painter who has lived in New York most of his life, what artists were discussing. "Politics," he replied without hesitating. "We are moving from a period of personal alienation and private introspection into a time of renewed social concern," he explained. "Sort of like the Thirties." One might take exception to his summary of post-World War II art, but he seems to have been correct about the current situation. Recent art is saturated with imagery that is avowedly political, and in the art world ideology has become the touchstone for some forms of criticism.

One manifestation of the current taste for politics is the growing number of conferences, seminars, and lecture series that address some aspect of the relationship between art and political ideology. This season the University of the Arts in Philadelphia has been holding a series of seven lectures entitled "Art: Act of Political Conscience," which sets out to "examine art as a political statement and its role in effecting social change." The university—billed in its promotional literature as "the only university in the nation devoted exclusively to education and professional training in the visual and performing arts"—is the result of a recent union between the Philadelphia College of Art and the Philadelphia College of the Performing Arts. Its president, Peter Solmssen, was for many years on the staff of the U.S. Department of State. The series was planned as part of Philadelphia's "We the People" celebration of the Constitution.

The opening lecture in the series was entitled "What is art and what is it good for? If art is communication, what are we communicating? If the world is burning does art have the eyes to see the fire and the water to fight it?" It was given by Peter Schumann, a sculptor who directs the politically oriented Bread and Puppet Theatre Company. The series will conclude in late March with a lecture entitled "Broken Glass," given by Jerry Kearns, a painter and professor of art at the University of Massachusetts. This lecture is described as being about "Art World censorship: the role played by distribution and context in the content of politicized art." In mid-October, I heard Sue Coe, an illustrator and painter from New York, talk on "Late Monopoly Capitalism and Culture."

Sue Coe has received generous attention from the art press in the last three or four years. A week before the lecture she was canonized as an art-world saint on the cover of the October issue of *ARTnews*. *ARTnews*, which appears to have appropriated an idea or two from *People* magazine, features cover stories on different art-world personalities each month. Coe was posed with her head held to one side, in a manner reminiscent of a Madonna. The expression in her eyes and the lines around her mouth suggest suffering, and perhaps a kind of martyrdom. She was photographed in front of one of her paintings, and two red circles in the painting formed a halo around her head. The face of a

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figure inside the circles can be seen indistinctly behind Miss Coe's head. Outside of the two circles are images of guns, clawed hands, and an obese body with the head of a silver dollar and a bomb in one hand. These images threaten the figure in the circles—and are readily understood to be the source of Miss Coe's suffering.

The program was supposed to include an opposing point of view by Norman Goldberg, an art historian and critic. But during the introduction we were told that Mr. Goldberg was sick, so Coe had the podium to herself. I was quite interested in hearing a discussion about the connection between "Late Monopoly Capitalism" and culture. In particular I wanted to hear about "Late Monopoly Capitalism," because it's one of those phrases that people tend to use without explanation. I assumed that the "Late" was being used prophetically, and that "Monopoly" signified control over resources, production, and distribution—in this case of cultural goods like paintings. But I looked forward to hearing someone who might really know what the term means.

Of course, it's possible to expect too much of a speaker, particularly in the visual arts, since the preferred medium is not words. But even with a generous handicap for vocational disability, Miss Coe's presentation simply failed to illuminate how "Late Monopoly Capitalism" might be related to culture. This doesn't mean that we couldn't discern how she felt about the subject—or at least how she felt about capitalism. But evidently she prefers ideological passion to careful analysis, and believes that vehemence is superior to coherence as a means of communication.

The format of the lecture was simple enough. Miss Coe showed slides of her work, and this was followed by a question-and-answer period. However, the presentation that accompanied the slides wasn't so simple. Miss Coe would usually begin by describing the subject of the painting on the screen, but this act apparently triggered associations that she would then digress on. Sometimes the connections were clear—but in many instances we were treated to small sermons that seemed to erupt directly from Miss Coe's ideological wellspring. The net effect was akin to a stream of consciousness monologue.

At one point in the lecture when things were getting pretty fuzzy, Coe paused and said, "Oh, I wish you could hear real Marxist analysis, it's so brilliant!" This was interesting for two reasons. First, it was an indication that she recognized her limitations. But more significantly, throughout the lecture she appeared to take pains to avoid identifying herself as a Marxist. Perhaps she wanted the audience to believe that Marxist categories are simply a means of getting at the truth, and that they don't necessarily lead to Marxist conclusions. At another point in the lecture, when she was discussing the possible demise of capitalism, Coe allowed that she wasn't a "mechanical Marxist." I'm not sure what she meant by that, but her opinions and judgments sounded doctrinaire enough to qualify for what is sometimes called "vulgar Marxism." This is the kind of fundamentalist Marxism that most academics are loath to be associated with, because of its outdated and simplistic determinism.

Sue Coe, however, is not embarrassed by simplistic determinism. In a remarkable aside during the question period she told us that "I've given so many interviews where they persist in seeing me as an individual. I'm not an individual." She said this to clarify her contention that "the whole creates the individual" and that "we see things in a class way." Naturally, the concept of class figures prominently in her judgment about things. So when someone asked her what she thought about art criticism, she responded that "it depends on the critic and the class base they come from." And when she was showing her painting "Woman Walks into Bar—is Raped by 4 Men on a Pooltable While 20 Watch," which depicts a widely publicized rape in New Bedford, Massachusetts, she said she "was so carried away by the outrage I didn't consider the class ramifications. It came out just anti-men."

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And so it went throughout the evening. Capitalism was characterized as "the most brutal system ever imagined." When asked if she believed that any other systems were better, she would not be drawn into comparisons. "I only deal with what's here. I don't talk about abstract good." In fact, while the whole presentation bristled with moral outrage, Coe was reluctant to acknowledge good and evil—perhaps because she thinks that they too are class creations. So when one questioner used the word evil, she cut him off with: "I see you use theological terms like evil." And previously she had stated that "any hierarchies of good and bad art are simply bourgeois."

As one might expect, America didn't do very well in Miss Coe's presentation. There were constant references to our very real social problems. But sometimes her assertions strained credibility. At least I can't imagine that very many people seriously believe that "the U.S. is plotting the overthrow of Corazon Aquino in the Philippines." Or that since there are missiles stationed in Britain, "America has an invading status in England." Western culture didn't fare much better. We were informed that "Kampuchea [Cambodia], which was razed to the ground a few years ago, now produces 4,000 books a month," and that "a country as poor as Ethiopia produces the best theater." The obvious conclusion was that "ethnocentric Western Art is definitely on the decline."

Now all of this gives Miss Coe's lecture a kind of order that wasn't there. The only orderly aspect of the evening came from the succession of slides of her work that ran like a spine through the length of her talk, and gave one a sense of sequence. The slides demonstrated that Coe is an illustrator at heart. When she came to the United States from Britain, she started doing illustrations for *The New York Times* Op-Ed page. She continues to do illustration today, and doesn't make any distinctions in terms of artistic value between her commercial illustrations and her paintings. Coe made it clear that she's not interested in nuance, subtlety, ambiguity, difficult content, aesthetics, personal expression, or anything else that might cloud the issues or smack of elitism. She began the lecture by saying that she was honored when people call her work propaganda "because I propagate ideas." Coe's paintings have covered repression in Chile and South Africa, protest against nuclear missiles in England, racial injustice, and homeless women. Reagan, Botha, and Thatcher are some of the world leaders that she has depicted. Other villains include multinational arms dealers, the CIA, and assorted policemen. Spiders and reptiles make occasional symbolic appearances in her work, while Malcolm X, Steve Biko, and Rosa Luxemburg are among her honored martyrs.

One is tempted to think of Sue Coe as a Neo-Expressionist. She emerged at about the same time as they did, and her art has the same tendencies toward hysteria, employing similar formal devices such as convulsive space and gothic lighting. But she had nothing but contempt for Neo-Expressionism, which she called "Neo-Expresso." In Coe's world, Neo-Expresso is an eviscerated capitalist fantasy; not at all the real thing. Obviously, reality is defined by her idea of acceptable social and political goals. But Coe is aware that her status as a celebrity in a system devoted to selling capitalist fantasies might appear compromising. So she opened the question period by posing and answering the obvious question, "Why do I have work in galleries?" She told us she sells art in galleries because "rich people buy art. I want to charge them to the maximum." And she knows that people buy her art for all of the wrong reasons, namely because it's "trendy and sexy" and has a dangerous, forbidden flavor. Coe sees this as a flaw in the work. "It's too bourgeois," she confessed.

I think Miss Coe is largely right in her assessment of what sells her work, as well as a lot of Neo-Expressionism. And I believed her when she told us she resists it. In fact, it is not an overly subtle distinction to say that her work is different from Neo-Expressionism. Although the emotional range of Coe's work is strictly limited by her politics, I have

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no doubt that it is authentically hers. With many Neo-Expressionist paintings, I can never get rid of the nagging feeling that I'm being given something that is an emotional fake, like the Apocalypse according to Marvel Comics. Of course, most Neo-Expressionists trade on ambiguity, which is not exactly Coe's forte. And then, too, Sue Coe is a better draughtsman than a lot of Neo-Expressionists. Neo-Expressionist painting often leaves one with the impression that the artist wants to hide the drawing, either in slathers of brushwork or by superimposing layers of images until any one form is obscured. By comparison, Coe's best work has a tautness and understanding of form that is rooted in skillful draughtsmanship.

In this regard, it is interesting that Coe had a lot to say about education, both her own and the kind that the students in the audience were getting. Her first remarks about art education were scathing denunciations of the emphasis art schools place on form, since in her view it's clearly content that matters in art. This elicited an enthusiastic response from the students, who complained loudly that they were being cheated out of a real education by being made to attend to all of that formal stuff. Coe went on to describe her boredom while endlessly drawing from the model during her first years at the Royal College of Art in London. Yet it's probably all of that irksome training that explains why she can draw. Later on, she tacitly acknowledged this. She related that when she started teaching at an American art school, she was shocked by the fact that students didn't want to work. She admitted that it was easier to lower her expectations than fight the status quo, and by the end of the evening, I had the impression she thought her own education superior to what American artists get.

The evening did end. Not with any kind of summary, or climax, or finishing touches, or arguments—but with a descent into linguistic and emotional entropy. Throughout the lecture a section of the audience (mostly young women) had acted as a chorus, enthusiastically cheering Coe's more intemperate and egregious statements. During the question-and-answer period they delivered some stirring speeches of their own, and interrupted Coe to help her answer questions. The questions were polite and circumspect, which seemed to annoy Coe. She chided the audience about this several times. Initially I thought the timidity in questioning her was because people really believed what she said. But finally, a gentleman who appeared to be about fifty-five stood up. He took a long time to phrase his question, because he was being very careful to qualify what he said. He told her he was sympathetic to her point of view, and certainly deplored the injustices she had described. But he thought perhaps she was a bit simplistic, and a bit unfair. He ended by asking why we should sit and listen to her, when she was so obviously biased. Coe's first response was, "You aren't sitting; you're standing." This kicked the chorus into action, and they stood up as a group and started shouting denunciations at the man. He tried to hold his ground, but finally sat down. So perhaps it was wisdom that kept people from asking more pointed questions.

There were a few other people who expressed reservations about Coe's presentation. But their questions were not about whether she was rational, honest, or fair. Their questions were about the desirability of any kind of social involvement. One man related that he had struggled for justice in the Bronx twenty years ago, and had seen blood in the streets, but nothing had changed. "Why," he wanted to know, "should we try to change anything?" This met with a lot of nods of agreement. Coe opined that optimism was better than despair, but the evening wound down, and the questions and answers seemed more desultory and detached. Finally it was over.

Perhaps I've made Sue Coe seem more reasonable and more open to diverse viewpoints than she really was. Several times during the evening she made it clear that in her view there is no middle ground. And like all zealots, she had an absolute sense of the

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innate rightness of her position, as well as a single-minded dedication to her mission. She told us that her "certitude" was "this situation is dehumanizing. It must be changed." Coe was clear that violence is an acceptable means of change—in fact, she made it sound inevitable. So while it's tempting to dismiss Coe's lecture as the fatuous rantings of a permanently fixated adolescent radical, it's not prudent to do so.

I couldn't help wondering what the students were getting from her lecture. Of course there was the chorus, but they seemed to be on automatic pilot. Since in the typical art school there isn't much room for history, philosophy, or political science, it's likely that the students really listening to Coe had only a rudimentary historical background, and weren't well-grounded in analytical or critical skills. Admittedly, common sense will do a lot—but I don't think it will necessarily expose twisted history or unwarranted conclusions, unless someone is inclined to follow up a presentation with independent research.

Then there's the question of passion and commitment. Coe is nothing if she's not committed, and she talks as though justice is right there beside her at the barricades. This must have a seductive appeal for students. Why not imitate her, and why not make art that looks a lot more exciting than . . . endless hours of drawing the same old forms? Coe certainly makes it sound more exciting and more moral to be a political artist than to be an art director for a chain of supermarkets or an artist who makes "useless luxury items."

Finally, one wonders why this kind of ideology plays so well to artists. It's hard to imagine what Norman Goldberg would have done to provide the opposing viewpoint. But it seems reasonable to assume that there would be no chorus for him, and considerably more skepticism about whatever he might have said. After all, he'd have to defend democratic values, and capitalism, and a country with visible failures. While it doesn't sound as though anyone else in the lecture series will approach Coe's extremism, the series' slant is transparent. The fact is, politics in the art world is fairly lockstep, with a predictable leftist cadence. There is talk of openness, but in the realm of public discourse the tolerance for opposing political ideas—including any defense of America—is very thin indeed.

It was quite a way to celebrate the Constitution.

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The purest Hitchens

by George Szamuely

Christopher Hitchens, a young man still only thirty-eight, seems, on the face of it, to belong to a rare species. From the glossies puffing the rich and famous like *Vanity Fair* and *Tatler* to the dour pink adornments of the newsstands like *The Nation* and *The New Statesman,* from the liberal *Observer* to the Tory *Spectator,* from affectedly literary quarterlies like *Raritan* and *Grand Street* to suburban dailies like *Newsday,* Hitchens bestrides the Atlantic, if not as a colossus, then at least as someone who's always to be found wherever there's a good party going in London, New York, or Washington.

There is something even more remarkable about Hitchens's elevation. Though other Englishmen have come to the United States and have either written about it in tones of indignation and outrage or domiciled themselves among inhabitants of this land who are no less contemptuous than they of the cultural poverty of the vast majority of its citizens, Christopher Hitchens has done all this without ever appearing as if he were in the business of alleviating the sufferings of his countrymen for their sudden decline of status in the world. By never seeming to imply that they do things so much better over in England and that it is merely unspecified personal circumstances that have forced him to take up residence here, he has succeeded in becoming a pillar of the anti-Establishment in America. As such he can provide stalwart support both for fashionable causes and fashionable people, while also maintaining a vantage point from which to satisfy the prurient curiosity of the English for whom familiarity with the Lilliputian America within which he has chosen to make his home is more than adequate to meet their less than insatiable intellectual appetites. That the English are irredeemably frivolous —especially in all matters pertaining to America—we have always known. Christopher Hitchens's elevation over here, however, is unhappy testimony to a residual and totally unwarranted awe in which Americans still hold the archetypal Englishman associated with elegant prose, charming manners, an inscrutably unpenetrating mind. It doesn't seem to matter whether the Englishman in question is a polemicist, a *poseur,* a nihilist, a social climber, or a left-wing snob; so long as he remains persuasively anti-American, the anti-Establishment in America will see to it that he is given lucrative employment and a glowing reputation.

As celebrity journalists go Hitchens does not appear to be daring or enterprising. He has, it is true, not hesitated to travel to a variety of countries from which he has sent back to his employers the requisite 1,200-word copy recounting his assorted doings and impressions: Greece, Cyprus, New Zealand, Canada, Zimbabwe, Malta, Thailand —all of these countries have indeed had the good fortune during the last five years to be the object of Hitchens's musings. Yet one cannot help noticing that conspicuously absent from his itinerary has been the stop-

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over in Beirut, the visit to Kabul followed by a trip to see the *mujahidin* in action, the journey into the bush with the *contras.*

This does not, of course, stop him from commenting on the lack of pluck of others. Thus two years ago in *The Spectator,* under the title "The Hawks with White Feathers," Hitchens wrote an article ridiculing the paltry military records of a number of conservatives frequently given to the advocacy of the use of force to solve problems. The point would perhaps have been worth discussing had he not chosen to conclude rather self-revealingly: "The serious radical long ago got bored with endless jokes about socialists who went to public school, had a private income, were embarrassed by having servants etc etc *ad nauseam* . . . . But everybody agrees, somewhere in their [sic] hearts, that there ought to be *some* connection between what you believe and how you behave . . . . At the moment, the gap is more conspicuous in the case of the summer soldiers and sunshine patriots."

The argument in these sentences wonderfully encapsulates the Hitchens style: the gay exposure of hypocrisy, always stopping just short of home. Having had a bit of harmless fun watching Hitchens bring out into the open a few more "dirty little secrets," the reader is suddenly brought up short: Enough of this merriment! Yes, it is true that "serious radicals" (among whose number Hitchens obviously counts himself) might also have problems. Hitchens himself, a product of Leys School, Cambridge and Balliol College, Oxford, a foreign correspondent who has been happily ensconced on Massachusetts Avenue NE, Washington, D.C. and maintaining his distance from war zones and socialist revolutions, might also perhaps have grounds for feeling a little uneasy. But no sooner does Hitchens entertain a few all-too-human feelings of guilt than he dismisses them as being unworthy of himself. He is merely "bored" when arguments employed *by* him are deployed *against* him. As for the italicized *"some,"* well, let's just leave it up to our candid exposer of hypocrisy to decide precisely how much or how little connection there should be "between what you believe and how you behave." But for the time being anyway, Hitchens's feeling is that it is the people with whom he disagrees, and not himself, who are hypocritical.

In 1985, a few months before the appearance of that *Spectator* article, Hitchens was also engaged in a similar sort of exercise in the pages of *The Nation.* He began his column: "Here I sit on Inauguration Day, my ball ticket for this evening looking at me reproachfully from the mantelpiece and my tuxedo gleaming on its hanger." Now Hitchens, as we already know, does not like to stay reproached for long. Starting with one topic no one can fail to be moved by—Rosa Luxemburg—he gets on to another: her detestation of cruelty to animals. This provides an occasion for a deliciously sententious observation to the effect that "it is quite rare to find a humanitarian who is indifferent to animals and surprisingly common to find that those who belittle animal rights are the same ones who find the pain of humans easy to bear." Any regular reader of *The Nation* who might be perplexed as to why Hitchens should be suddenly worrying about the plight of the non-human kingdom, since as far as man's cruelty to man goes there had been no dramatic diminution in its occurrence, does not have to wait long for illumination: our social critic is about to don his tuxedo and make his way to the ball where what he so gallantly dubs "Republican womanhood" is already gathering to celebrate a victory at the polls. "I know before I get there that the well-upholstered shoulders will be garnished with a pointless riot of endangered fur." So that's all right, then; Hitchens can have this party and not feel too guilty about it. He and his liberal readers have had their uplifting thought for the day. Though such feeble wrestling with what passes for conscience may appear to be child-like and naïve, it nevertheless serves notice as to the character of latter-day pleasure-seekers posing as moralists.

Alternatively peevish and good-humored, cynical and committed, sanctimonious and

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self-indulgent, a nob and man of the people, a self-proclaimed hypocrite who is nevertheless hard on the hypocrisy of others, Hitchens is a tough man to pin down. You are never meant to know if he is being serious or not. He delights in having the right to pick and choose when and how he will take a position on anything. In his *Nation* column he appears to be second to none in the strength of his passions against the Reagan administration, the neo-conservatives, the New Right, the *contras,* and so on. Yet on closer inspection the man seems to be putting us on. Yes, he is a radical—even a "serious radical" if it comes to that—but his radicalism or socialism is not to come at the expense of a pungent phrase, or an excellent lunch in a splendid Washington restaurant with someone important and well-connected, or a taxi ride which will enable him to have an informative little chat with the driver, or a holiday in the sun so that he might imbibe a strong dose of life-sustaining Mediterranean civilization. Nor will his radicalism get bogged down with the hot and sweaty commitments that have sometimes weighed down other would-be revolutionaries. Since we already know just how agreeably Hitchens can come to terms with his conscience, it would surely be only pedantry to insist on knowing whether he is being serious when he declares that Reagan is a "village idiot" given to "cretinous simplification, historical falsehood, . . . 'deniable' racist innuendo . . . and senile discourtesy" (*The Nation,* September 20, 1986), or that President Mitterrand "is, and always has been, a posturing, fawning jerk" (*The Nation,* September 14, 1985), or even that the kind of person who is likely to lock him up in the Soviet Union for demonstrating on behalf of nuclear disarmament will have "precisely those features and that tone of voice" that characterizes "the Social Democrats, USA" (*The Nation,* July 6/13, 1985).

The important thing is to adopt serious attitudes without being, not to put too fine a point on it, too serious about it. Hitchens can turn it on, Hitchens can turn it off. And therein lies the reason for his celebrity. His commitments are bought on the cheap: nothing ever has to be lost, nothing ever has to be defended, nothing ever has to be justified, nothing is ever sacrificed. The pose is all that counts.

Hitchens can ridicule the high and mighty in the best radical-journalist fashion when he wants to, but he will also, as in a recent profile of Katharine Graham, make generally friendly and approving noises about just such notables. In the best indignant English gentleman's tone he will bewail "the cheerful, bottomless ignorance to be encountered when making campus speaking tours," yet, when William Bennett's National Endowment for the Humanities report came out a few years ago—well, its prose left something to be desired, old boy, it was based on the work of something "huge and cumbersome" that these Americans, bless their little hearts, call a "study group," if you please, and then its findings (oh dear, how can one put it) "do not exactly soar to the empyrean" (*TLS,* December 14, 1984).

Yes, he does indeed support "trade unions in Poland" (as if that was all that ever was at issue) but on a question like this, one has to be terribly careful about one's friends: after all, as he pointed out on another occasion, in "the recesses of certain Munich broadcasting stations" the potential liberators of Eastern Europe are "the sweepings and castoffs of the Third Reich" (*The Nation,* July 19/26, 1986). And, fellow radicals, be warned, being anti-Reagan does not necessarily keep you from *being* Reagan. Louis Farrakhan, for instance, must be deplored in the strongest possible terms: he is "more a black Reagan than a black Falwell or Kahane. His vision is one of backward, utopian, simple-minded 'self-help,' a half-assed free enterprise backed up by subsidies to the few. Like Reagan, he knows how to wow an audience by telling cheap, shifty, suggestive anecdotes about 'out-groups'" (*The Nation,* October 26, 1985).

Having had a bit of fun throwing down a challenge to all that they had better come up with a "definition" of terrorism before they next venture to pronounce on the subject, in

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The Nation of August 3/10, 1985 he found himself groping tentatively toward an answer to his own question: nihilism is what characterizes a terrorist and precisely "this is what he has in common with the rulers of our world, who subject us to lectures about the need to oppose terrorism, while they prepare, daily and hourly, for the annihilation of us all." The legerdemain—not to say intellectual dishonesty—of these arguments undoubtedly gives them a certain charm. The charm lies in the reversal of terms. You have to call your enemy the worst thing you can think of. And the worst thing you can think of is the worst thing *he* can think of. And provided you are quick on your feet you get to play this game again and again. Terms like Stalinist, terrorist, totalitarian, Zhdanovite are appropriated and turned against his spluttering and foaming enemies who had hitherto enjoyed a monopoly on these ideological missiles and who are now suddenly bereft of any weapons in their armory other than the pitiful question that Hitchens ended up with when he parodied Robert Novak and television talk shows so mercilessly in a recent issue of *Harper's*: "Now, Mr. Lefty, you're an apologist for the Soviets. What do you have to say about this?"

Nimble, quick-witted, not weighed down by any heavy burden of apologetics, Hitchens is a master of the arts of being on the "right" side without having to worry if any awkward item is going to turn up in tomorrow morning's newspaper that you might have difficulty explaining away; of feeling guilty yet being reproachful of others; and of being both *engagé* and also a judicious observer, long on stern admonitions but short on ideas. His voice is oddly reassuring, predictable, rather cozy. The moment we enter Hitchens's world we find ourselves among the familiar, well-delineated landmarks of the liberal-leftist bestiary.

Although his writings betray a near-obsession with right-wing policies, right-wing pundits, and right-wing regimes, his own views never come to the fore. True, he appears to be consistently on the side of the little guy against the big guy: thus he is for tiny Malta and little New Zealand against big Great Britain and the even bigger United States; thus he is for the Cypriots against the big Greeks, the bigger Turks, and, of course, the grotesque United States; and, as he makes clear in *The Elgin Marbles,*[1] he is very much on the side of the Greeks against the mighty British Museum.

Yet in this, his latest book, as in the rest of his writings, sympathy for the underdog is a strikingly less pronounced feature than is contempt and scorn for the overdog. Hitchens's love for Greek civilization, ancient or modern, for the Greek language, ancient or modern, is nowhere near as convincing as is his eagerness to caricature and humiliate all those who have ever regarded the marbles, like other relics of the ancient Greek world, as belonging to the repository of Western civilization as a whole rather than to any specific country. Consequently Elgin must be shown to have "stolen" the marbles, and a set of Helleno-phile luminaries including Byron, Seferis, Cavafy, Harold Nicolson, Colin MacInnes introduced, quoted profusely from, and then counterposed to a motley crew of retentionists ("John Bull up on his hind legs") who are made to look ridiculous, reactionary, and somewhat shady.

What makes his writings so appealing to the post-Reagan radical chic is that they appear to be much less the work of a pundit, a commentator, a reporter, or an historian, and rather more the productions of a clever, smart-assed (to use his lexicon) student who is always working out the answer to the question he hasn't yet been asked. From Abortion to Zimbabwe Hitchens will strike any ball lobbed at him by any foolhardy Reaganaut faster than you can say Adolfo Calero or Elliott Abrams. It may not make for particularly edifying or even illuminating reading, yet nevertheless the effect of this public debate that Hitchens conducts with himself is to create an impression that he or

1 *The Elgin Marbles,* by Christopher Hitchens, with essays by Robert Browning and Graham Binns; Chatto & Windus, 137 pages, £12.95.

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his side or his cause (though we cannot for the life of us figure out what they are) are somehow winning the day.

No one other than Hitchens can move so easily from sectarian tracts to glossy magazines to intellectual quarterlies.[2] In a recent item in his monthly "American Notes" column in the *TLS* Hitchens applauded the "thaw" (he actually used the term) of American views of the Soviet Union. After an exquisitely patronizing (in the best *TLS* fashion) survey of the various manifestations of the American discovery of *glasnost* he concluded on a note of magisterial pomposity: U.S. views "ought not to soften any faster, or any slower, than the reality." A reasonable enough statement, were it not for the devious reversal whereby it appears as if *glasnost* was something taking place in the United States. Still, as jokes go it's not such a bad one. Yet a few weeks before that in the *New Statesman* the tone was distinctly less good-humored: "Whatever view may be taken of his [Gorbachev's] chances . . . he has made it impossible to demonise the Soviet Union in the way that the Reaganites need it to be demonised for their world view to make any sense. It has been most interesting to see the fixed grins they wear when they speak through clenched teeth about the 'fascinating new situation' created by the General Secretary."

It is far from clear what Hitchens is trying to say here. Why has it suddenly become impossible to demonize the Soviet Union? Why is it so strange to find the Soviet Union being treated like a human being once it seems—even falsely—to be behaving in a human way? Are the Americans taking *glasnost* seriously or not? Does Hitchens care? Once again he seems to be on the "right" side expressing strong arguments without apparently arguing anything in particular. What the glossy magazines and the earnest literary journals today seem to have in common—which is in fact a distinctive characteristic of Hitchens's style—is nihilism masquerading as moral commitment. Hitchens's violent denunciations of Reagan, the New Right, the neo-conservatives, in *The Nation* and the *New Statesman*; his exposure of the homosexual-infested, pornography-addicted, draft-dodging, barely literate, Godless Right amidst a lot of guffawing, nudging, and winking in some of the more up-market, yuppie kinds of magazines; his more staid and elaborate jokes about illiteracy among those who worry about the rising tide of illiteracy, in the *TLS*—all these manifest the contemporary face of nihilism. No longer believing in any of the old "truths," he refuses to believe any of the new ones. And like other nihilists Hitchens is prone to take an updated Manichaean view of the world: the sincere sceptic versus the false believer, or so he seems to think.

However agile Hitchens may be, he will always be forced to come back to familiar stereotypes. His nihilism is a nihilism that does not even believe in itself. He is not prepared to go all the way and jettison the whole idea of socialism—only existing socialisms; Communism may well amount to no more than gulags and barbed wire, but "anti-Communism" is still the occupation of the cad; he does not appear to adhere to much of the traditional program of the Left; all the more need for the ostentatious display of commitment. Instead of argument he will specialize in the *ad hominem* attack. But the result is that the world is not enriched by Hitchens's writings and, sadly, one must suspect—and the evidence of his work surely bears this out—that his own world is probably not enriched by it either.

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2 Always on the alert for upscale opportunities, Hitchens closed 1987—a busy year—by resigning two of his regular London outlets, the "American Notes" column in the *TLS* ("I should prefer to stop while there is still a chance that people will ask why instead of why not") and his "Stateside Diary" in *The New Statesman* ("I'm off to write a book"), and opened 1988 with a dithyrambic account of the newly decorated penthouse apartment belonging to Jerry Della Femina and Judy Licht in (where else?) *House & Garden* (". . . the first effect of the apartment is moderately gasp making . . . . The effect of the central living space is dramatically offset when we move to the den." Etc.).

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Letters

Doing new music, doing American music

Dear Mr. Lipman:
I just read your article in *The New Criterion* ("Doing New Music, Doing American Music," November 1987). I now feel sorry for you.

To introduce myself as you did in the article: I teach at the University of California, San Diego. Conduct the orchestra and co-ordinate the new music group and teach various classes in theory, etc. In the summer I have a festival in New Hampshire and have been there since 1960. We have a chamber orchestra and a varied program to suit a very conservative audience. I studied with Ernst Krenek and Stefan Wolpe at Black Mountain and have always had an avid interest in new music.

I have read *The New Criterion* since it came out . . . usually at the library but this fall subscribed. I like the articles and enjoy the sort of nay-saying attitude that often appears. I have read both of your books and actually paid for *The House of Music*. Therefore I am not a Lipman hater.

I feel sorry for your education . . . it seems bizarre that one could go to Juilliard and seem not to have played the Webern *Variations* and *no* Ives. And you have kept it up with a little pride. I sympathize with your problems with the Elliott Carter piano concerto, and with many of your views of new music in your articles. But when I read what you had been pushing at the Waterloo Music Festival it was almost funny. I can see bringing back all sorts of music for all sorts of reasons, but your strange pride in Hanson's *Beowulf* and some others is a real puzzle. But I agree on your choice of the Piston Fourth Symphony. (And it was written for the University of Minnesota, my alma mater.) One can disagree on various works and agree on others, but the tenor of your article is that you are now proud of being so comfortable (that may be a description) . . . .

I do suggest there are a few composers that may strike you. For one: Eric Stokes of Minneapolis. He has a real gem to do at Waterloo, an Ivesian tuba concerto (obbligato?) called *Center Harbor Holiday* . . . plus a work called *Symphonies* . . . some short works for orchestra and audience . . . .

Robert Erickson has some works your conductor, Gerard Schwarz, would like. Erickson is here at the University of California . . . .

Don't give up, Lipman.

Thomas Nee
Leucadia, CA

Samuel Lipman replies:
I can't say I'm glad that Thomas Nee feels sorry for me, but at least sorrow is a sympathetic emotion, and a critic can always use a bit of sympathy.

But I do wish Mr. Nee could manage to spare some of his sorrow for the musical repertory. For him, a kind of random dipping into past and present—now Webern and Ives, now Piston and Erickson—fills the bill, as if musical programming were no more than a kind of pinning the tale on the donkey.

Our problem, it seems to me, is to find a

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coherent view of our musical history. For Mr. Nee, my "strange pride in Hanson's *Beowulf* and some others is a real puzzle." For me my pride in doing these neglected but nonetheless significant and beautiful works—I assume, by the way, that Mr. Nee's category of "some others" includes Ernest Bloch's moving symphonic rhapsody *America,* which we performed at Waterloo last summer on the same program with the Hanson—consists in setting the historical record straight. By making the major works of our musical past available to musicians and audiences, I hope that our present idea of new music as either rebarbative or ephemeral (or both at once) may be replaced by a sense of a continuing artistic tradition. That I can do so by presenting works that I find beautiful is cause enough, for me, for all kinds of pride.

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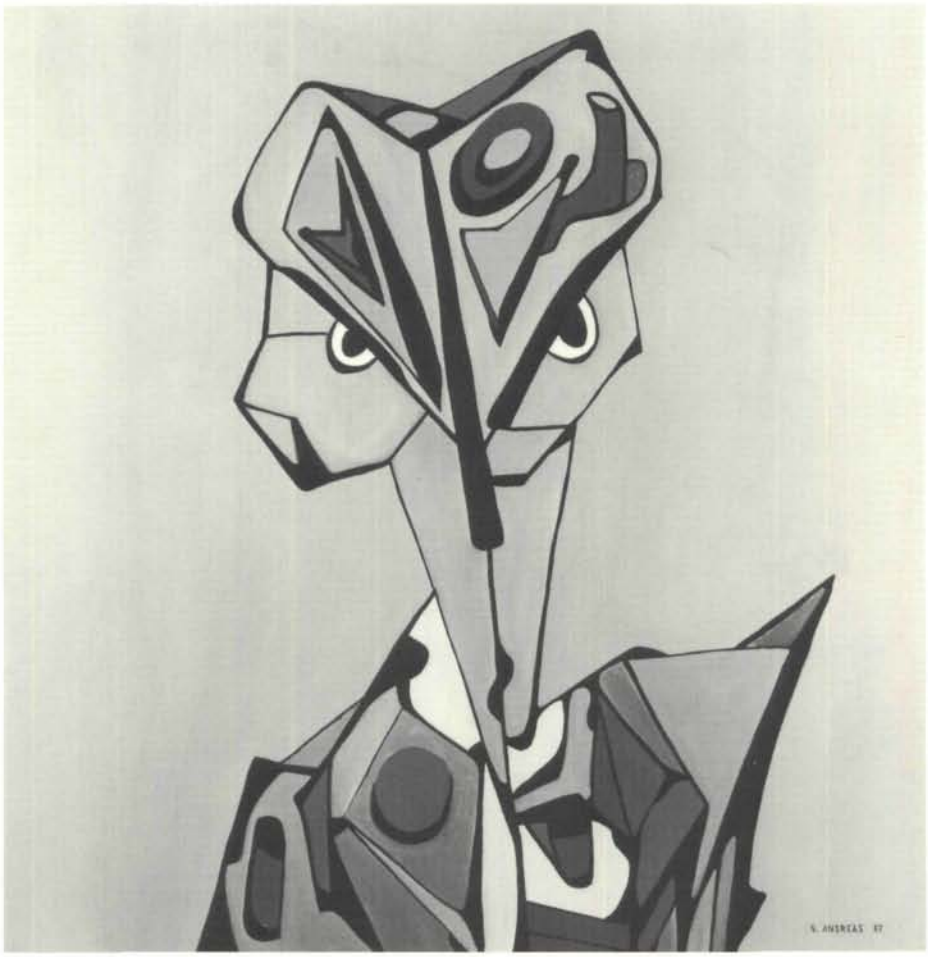

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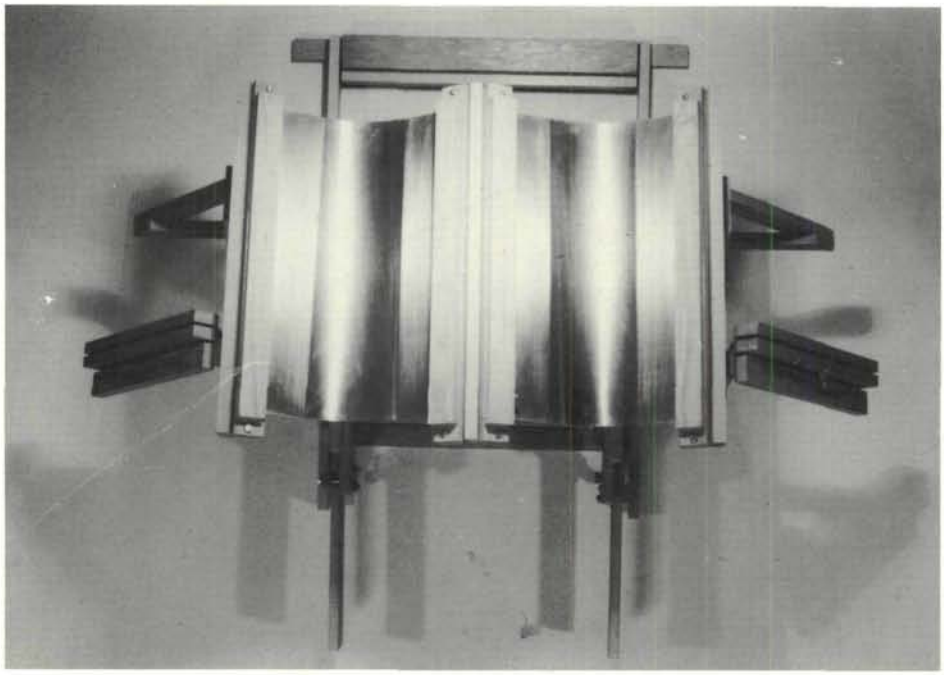

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